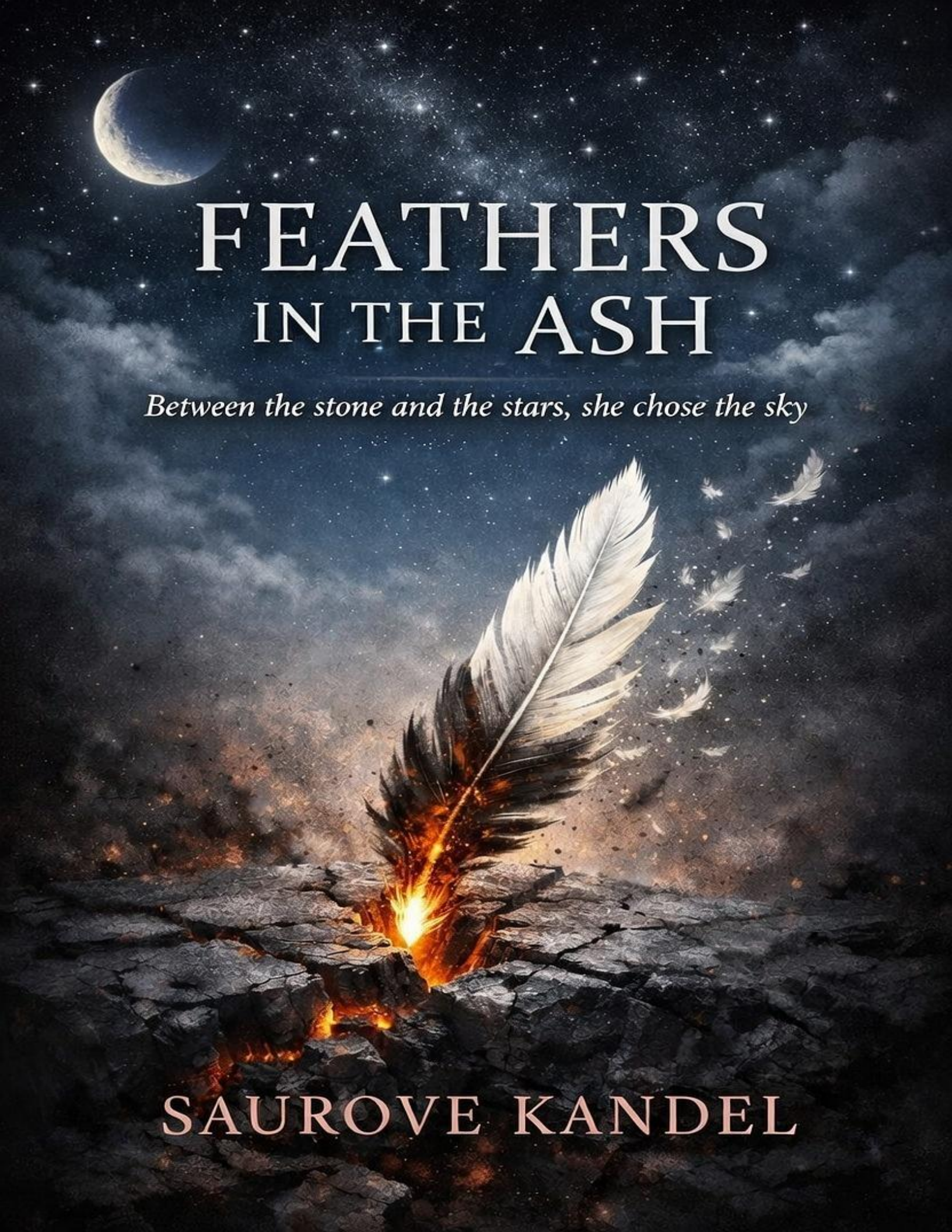
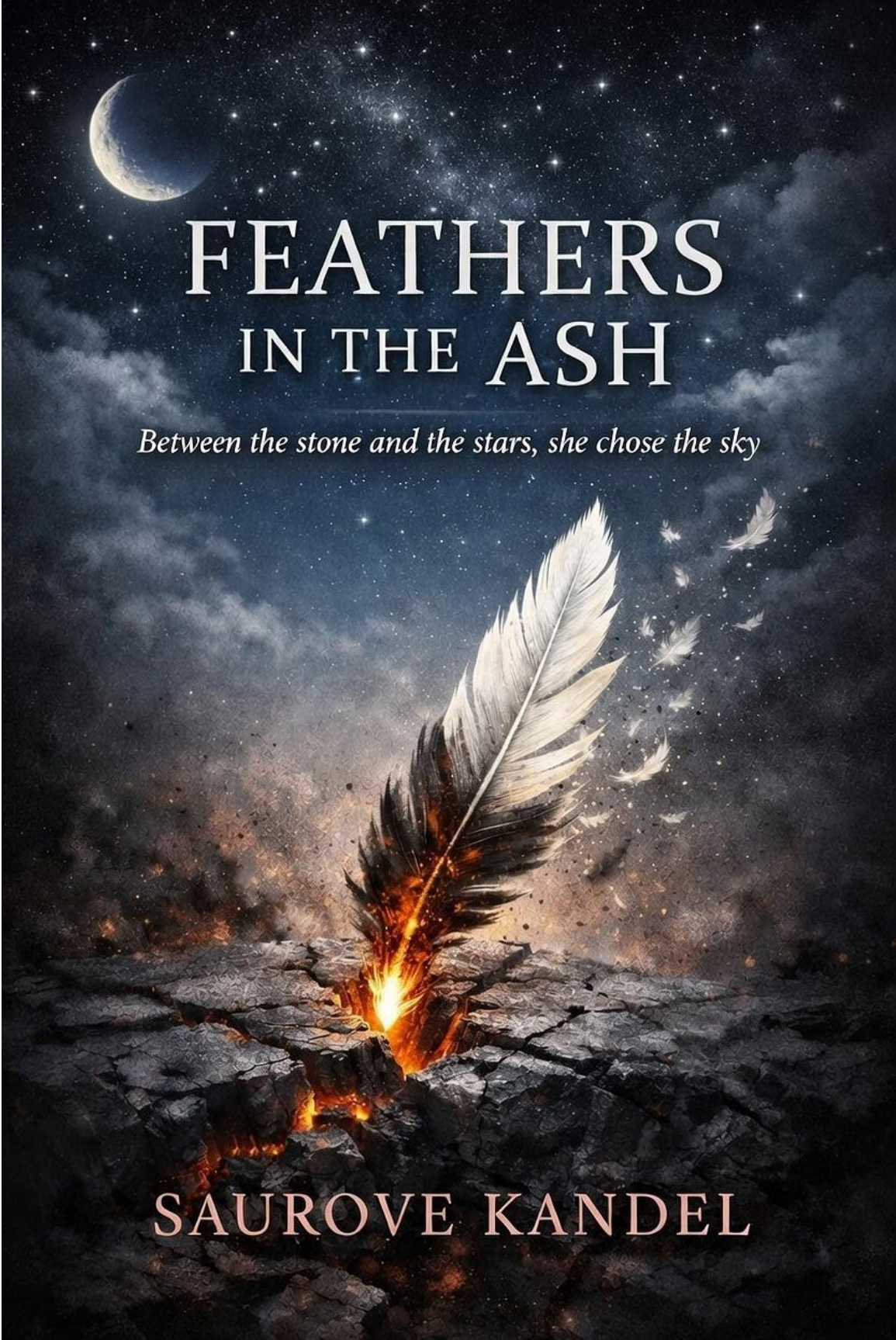




# FEATHERS IN THE ASH

*Between the stone and the stars, she chose the sky*

SAUROVE KANDEL



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Feathers in the Ash

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*To my mother and sister. To every girl who has forged her pain into  
power, and polished it until it shines.*

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# Preface

First and foremost, let me speak about the birth of this story. In 2015, while scrolling through Facebook, I came across a sad, heartbreaking post. An article about ***Breast Ironing***. It immediately piqued my interest. I read it carefully. It was brief, offering only a few details. Unsatisfied, I turned to Google and began searching for everything I could find about breast ironing.

The more I read, the more disturbing and horrifying the truth became. Slowly, a heavy weight settled in my chest, and I felt myself sinking into a pool of despair. I also watched videos related to this harrowing practice on YouTube, including a short documentary about a girl whose breast was flattened mercilessly by her own mother. I was flabbergasted. I was shattered.

And then a thought took hold of me: I had to write a story. A story about breast ironing. I had to offer the world not the comfort of illusion, but a truth as clear and transparent as a freshwater lake. And so I began my work. The dance of letters across the white background of my laptop screen.

# Acknowledgments

*Feathers in the Ash* is the result of my deep research into *Breast Ironing*. After completing it, I shared the manuscript with a few close comrades. To my utter surprise, none of them believed it was written by me. I was completely overwhelmed.

Writing this story was profoundly painful. I wept as I wrote; my heart felt as though it were shattering into countless fragments. Yet when the tale was finally complete, I experienced a strange release. As if stepping into sunlight after emerging from a long, dark chamber of melancholy.

I remain deeply indebted to my dearest brother, **Manoj Rana**, whose love for this story exceeded all my expectations.

My heartfelt thanks go to my best pal, **Gaurab Panthee**, for his unwavering support and affection. Like the moon, you shimmer constantly in the pool of my heart, and I have captured a fleeting reflection of you in my water world.

A thousand sunbeams of gratitude to my dearest buddy, **Sagar Bhattarai**. You are the walls built of memory and friendship. Forever standing. Forever smiling.

Immense thanks to my coolest comrade, **Saurav Panthee**, for your mountain of motivation. You are timeless in spirit, with a humor that never fades.

I send stars and comets of thanks to my luminous friend, **Sandesh Koirala**, for his bright insights on the manuscript. Keep on shining, always.

To my evergreen sister, **Samjhana Kandel**, I cannot thank you enough. Words cannot hold the gratitude I feel. You are a paradise in yourself. The land of eternal joy.

To my chivalrous and brave-hearted brother-in-law, **Deepak Gupta**, I offer you immortal thanks from my soul-land. You're a man of divine compassion. May you always stay the same. Calm, composed and godly.

To my dear student, **Priya Gupta**, I offer every flower of thanks this world could hold. Your comment on my project was not just a praise, it was a lullaby from heaven. A gift from an angel herself.

Last but not least, I am deeply grateful to all my remaining friends whose names I may have inadvertently missed. Each of you has lifted my spirit and made me feel truly extraordinary.

**S.K**

I

Feathers in the Ash

1

# Prologue

Some stories are not born. They are excavated. Unearthed from the silent bedrock of a culture's shame. They emerge not as simple narratives, but as living cartography of pain.

This is one such map.

It charts a territory both specific and universal: the body of a girl. Not as a temple, but as a battleground. Not as a promise, but as a threat to be neutralized. The coordinates are real. The lush, demanding soil of Cameroon. The tradition is real. A practice grotesquely named breast ironing, where heat and stone are used not to shape fabric, but to erase the future from a girl's chest.

But this is not a report. It is a transmutation.

It begins with Broomhilda Vane at fifteen, on the precipice. Her world is one of sizzling fish and morning light, of secret rhythms tapped under tables, of a mind that dreams in calculus and constellations. It is a world about to be unmade by a love that wears the mask of destruction. A mother's hands, guided by a lineage of fear, will trade an iron for a hug, a scorching stone for a lullaby.

This is the story of that unmaking. And then, it is the story of the remaking.

For what grows in the ashes of such violence is not always more ash. Sometimes, if the spirit is a particular, stubborn kind of star-stuff, it grows feathers.

This is a story told in two languages. The first is the language of the body: searing, silencing, a scream absorbed by dusty walls. The second is the language of the cosmos: the cool logic of selenography, the vast metaphor of tidal forces, the silent mechanics of flight. It is the story of how one girl, flattened into a single, terrible note, learns to hear the music of the spheres. And then, aching, to sing back.

Her guides are two: a boy named Albert, whose heart is a celestial diamond forged in his own strange fears, and the moon herself, a sovereign of tranquility and radiance who offers not pity, but a pact of transformation.

So turn this page and step across the threshold. You are entering the Chamber of Hell, yes. But you are also entering the Missionary Library, the Air of Freedom, the silent, determined cartography of scars becoming constellations.

This is the story of a girl who was burned.

This is the story of the phoenix she became.

This is *Feathers in the Ash*.

## Breast Ironing

The morning sun streamed into the kitchen, golden beams spilling across the worn counter where I turned mackerel and sardines on the griddle. Their sizzle was the day's first music. From the other room, my mother's voice called. A raspy note drifting through the air, frayed by the cold that had clung to her for days.

"Broomhilda?"

"Yes, Mama?"

"Could you prepare me a coffee?"

"Sure. Coming right up."

I moved quickly, the chores familiar. As I set the kettle to boil, I pushed open the window. A soft, warm breeze, carrying the scent of damp earth and blossoming *frangipani*, entered the room. Sunbeams, solid as pillars, fell through the leaves of the mango tree, dappling the floor. One found my cheek. A gentle, insistent finger of light. High above, a single cloud, long and sharp as a scimitar, gleamed against the blue like polished magnalium. Small birds, feathered sparks of life, darted from branch to branch, their calls stitching the

quiet with urgent, joyful songs. It was a morning painted in beauty and promise.

After washing my face, I stood before the small mirror on the wall. My own face, still soft with sleep, looked back at me. Eyes clouded, lips uncertain, a stranger rehearsing the day.

“You look strange today,” I whispered.

The silvered glass seemed to hold the light a beat too long, as though deciding whether to give me back my own shape.

“You are the stranger,” it whispered at last, in that voice only the mind can hear. “Have you not felt it, the way your skin does not quite belong to you in the morning?”

“I feel unfinished,” I said, tugging at a curl that refused to behave. “As if someone sketched me in the night, then forgot to finish me by morning.”

“Every morning does that,” the mirror replied. “It leaves you as an incomplete possibility.”

“Perhaps,” I murmured, leaning closer. “Tell me something simple, then. Am I beautiful?”

“That is not the question to ask,” the mirror said gently. “I am not a judge. You are beautiful in your own way. No one has the right to call you ugly, nor does anyone need to remind you of your beauty.” the mirror said. “You were born beautiful. And you will die beautifully.”

“What are you, then?” I asked.

“A witness.”

The word lingered between us, heavier than it should have been.

“A witness to what?”

“To the way you arrive each morning,” it said. “Armed with hopes you pretend not to have. Bruised by thoughts you never confess. You come to me

not to be seen, but to be believed.”

I swallowed. “Believed in what?”

“In your own existence.”

Silence thickened the air, until it felt as though the room itself were listening.

“And truth?” I asked at last. “What do you know of the truth, then?”

The mirror dimmed slightly, as if the glass were breathing.

“Truth is the reflection of what is, whether masked or revealed,” it murmured. “I am its humble sign. I show the face that exists. If you are a shadow, I do not show light. Truth does not transfigure. It does not destroy. It simply... is.”

I touched the cool surface, my fingertip meeting its colder twin.

“So you will never lie to me?”

“No,” the mirror said. “But you will. And that is why you keep coming back.”

“And mystery?”

“Mystery is the bridge,” it said, its voice growing fainter. “The only link between the false and the true. A precarious middle ground. To live is to find your way across that bridge. That is where the secret is unveiled.”

A smile touched my lips. “Thank you for the metaphysics.”

“I will be here,” it seemed to say, as I turned away. “Waiting.”

In the kitchen, Mama sat cradling her chipped mug, filled with the coffee I’d brewed earlier and forgotten. The steam curled around her face, softening the tired lines. She wore a red sleeveless dress. A slash of color in the gentle light. A golden bracelet glinted at her wrist. At thirty-five, she was still a beautiful woman, her smile capable of magic, though today it seemed reserved.

“Broomhilda?”

“Yes?”

“The rooms are clean?”

“Yes, Mama.”

“Who were you speaking to just now?”

“To the mirror. To myself.”

She took a slow sip, her eyes holding mine over the rim.

“Hmm. You are fifteen now. It is not so good, a girl your age talking alone to mirrors.”

A flush crept up my neck. Was it not normal to seek your own eyes, to converse with the silent companion in the glass? Every girl I knew did it.

“I see the question on your face,” she said, a faint frown touching her brow. “I was just the same. At your age, I lived before my mirror. I dreamed of the world, constructed beautiful futures, imagined a love that would choose me and hold me close.”

Her gaze drifted to the window, to the scimitar cloud now beginning to blur.

“But dreams... they are like dew on the lotus leaf, my child. Brilliant at dawn, gone by midday.”

Her words settled in the quiet kitchen. Heavy and final. I had no reply. My eyes settled on the picture on the wall: a man climbing a steep, mist-shrouded mountain, forever ascending.

“This is an age of unexpected things,” she continued, her voice low and intent. “You must learn control, lest others seize it from you.”

“I know, Mama. Papa says boys play with feelings. That they can ruin a life.”

“Yes,” she said, the word a soft exhalation. “Precisely.”

She went to feed the chickens. Papa and my older sister, Mary, had gone to the field hours before. We are a people of the earth here in Cameroon. The rain is generous. And the soil answers with cassava, yam, and plantain.

Later, we gathered for the midday meal. The grilled fish. The hearty staples. A scene of familiar abundance. Papa tuned the old radio. Rihanna's voice, a cool and modern spirit, wove through the room, and for a moment, my foot tapped a secret rhythm under the table. I dared not dance, not with Papa here, though when alone, my body would sometimes answer such calls.

Suddenly, Mama took Mary's hand. "Come," she said, her tone leaving no room for question. They disappeared into the back room.

A strange silence fell, punctuated only by the distant radio. A blade of intuition, cold and sharp, pulled me to the door. I pressed my ear against the warm wood.

"You are seventeen," Mama's voice was strained, hushed. "It is time for the breast ironing."

"No, Mama. Please. I can't."

"It is our tradition. I endured it. Your grandmother endured it. It is for your safety."

"Safety?" Mary's voice was a choked sob. "It will break me."

"You will do as I say. Or you will not set foot in that college." Mama's words hit like a snowstorm, freezing anyone in their tracks. "Believe me, child, I only want to protect you from evil eyes. We start today."

"My body is my own! You gave me life, but you do not own it!"

"Enough. You will follow the path I show you. Do you hear me?"

A silence fell, heavier and denser than the deepest mist in the pine forest.

I stumbled back to the kitchen, my heart a frantic drum. The words echoed in my skull, senseless and terrifying: *Breast ironing*. What ritual was this? What

destruction wore the mask of safety?

Mechanically, I washed the dishes. The clatter of plates masked the panic in my mind. I turned on the television, but the newsreader's face blurred. Those two words were a splinter in my thoughts. I would ask Mary. After school, I would demand to know.

Seeking solace, I stepped under the shower. The water beat down. A cascade tried to wash away the dread. I scrubbed my scalp with shampoo. The sharp, clean scent of mint filled the steamy air. Wrapped in a towel, I stepped back into my room. The sun, now higher, pierced the woods outside my window, throwing a long, luminous blade of light across my floor that ended softly against my skin. The air was humid, sweet, alive. A brook murmured nearby, a constant, soothing secret. For a moment, nature's immense peace flowed into me, recharging a spirit I did not yet know was about to be switched off.

My watch glinted: 9 a.m.

Papa appeared at my doorway, his hat in his hands.

"Come on, Broomhilda. Time for school."

"Yes, Papa. I am ready."

The question about breast ironing burned on my tongue. But shame, hot and sudden, clamping my lips shut. I could not ask him.

I dressed quickly in my uniform. The white-streaked blouse. The navy skirt. The tie I fastened with practiced hands. From my grandfather's antique wardrobe, the last piece of him, the fabric carried a scent of camphor and memory. I brushed my hair till it shone. Polished my shoes to a dark gleam.

In the main room, Mary was bent over a book, her posture a fortress. Mama was outside, tending to the chickens. Papa was gone, back to the earth.

With a final coat of mascara, one last delicate stroke of paint on my eyes, I was ready.

The road to school was a half-hour journey I usually treasured. But that day, the rosy morning air felt thin. The sun's cheerful smirk in the azure sky seemed a cruel joke. Other students streamed past. Their laughter bright and alien. The pleasant bird calls, the pondering beauty of the hills that usually filled my heart with a juicy happiness, all of it was now behind a pane of glass. I walked alone. Truly alone, for the first time, carrying the heavy, unspoken words with me. Around me, oblivious, the crickets sang, and the world went on, poised on the brittle edge of a terrible, coming change.

Sometimes I walk among the crowd, yet my soul wanders deep into dark woods, under a turquoise sky littered with clouds, like cotton balls drifting lazily in the air.

## A Different Natured-Girl

I was late. The classroom door loomed before me. A barrier of polished wood and muffled sound. I took a breath, knocked, and pushed it open.

“May I come in, sir?”

The biology teacher paused his lecture, his eyes finding mine over the rims of his glasses. “Come in.”

A sea of familiar faces turned as I entered. The room felt airless. Every bench packed with the press of bodies and open books. For a disorienting moment, I hovered near the doorway until I spotted a single vacancy on the last bench, beside a boy I did not recognize. Our eyes met briefly, a flicker of mutual assessment, before I slid into the seat.

“Miss Broomhilda,” the teacher said, his voice pulling the class’s attention back to the front. “Your roll call?”

I stood quickly.

“Fifty, sir.”

“Be seated. Thank you.” He cleared his throat and addressed the room:

“Before we proceed, allow me to introduce our new student.” He gestured toward the back. “Mr. Albert, would you kindly introduce yourself?”

The boy beside me rose. He wore spectacles that gave him a serious, scholarly air.

“My name is Albert Jackson. I am from Nigeria, and I have lived in Cameroon for five years.”

His voice held a calm, melodic quality that quieted the usual rustling in the room. As he sat, I caught a scent of clean laundry and pencil shavings.

Sir launched into a lesson on plant reproduction. I was an average student. My mind often drifting to the distant, cloud-swept dream of being a pilot. A dream my family called ambitious, a word they spat out mockingly. But I clung to it, a secret fuel in my veins.

“Can anyone define ‘ovary’?” Sir asked, scanning the room.

Beside me, Albert’s hand went up, steady and sure.

“Albert?”

“*Integumented megasporangium* refers to the ovary, sir.”

“Marvelous!” Sir’s face broke into a smile. “You seem quite talented. Perhaps you should sit at the front?”

“Thank you, sir, but I prefer the last bench.”

“You’ll strain your eyes, seeing the board from there.”

Albert touched the frame of his glasses.

“I have powerful spectacles, sir.” He said.

A wave of laughter rippled through the class, breaking the tension. Sir chuckled. “As you wish.”

The hour bled away, and with the teacher’s dismissal, the classroom exhaled. A roar of released voices swelled, a cacophony of scraping chairs and adolescent laughter that throbbed against my temples. In that din, we were an

island of two. Albert, bent so close to his book his breath might fog the page, and I, wrapped in my own quiet. The noise felt like physical pressure. A dull ache building behind my eyes.

Then, a soft thud. He had closed his book. When I looked up, his gaze was already on me, curious and steady behind his spectacles. His eyes, magnified behind his lenses, were a warm, intelligent brown.

“Your name is Broomhilda, right?” he said, his voice cutting cleanly through the residual chatter.

“Yes. How did you know?”

He smiled. “I ‘parroted’ it when sir asked for your roll call. ” A soft laugh slipped free.

“You must be brainy.”

“I don’t think so. I’m just... curious.” He shifted his books. “What do you think of this school?”

“It’s fine. We have good labs.”

“I find it a bit gruesome,” he said, his voice dropping to a taunting whisper.

“Gruesome? Don’t be silly.”

“I think there’s a ghost in the building.”

A mischievous impulse seized me. I leaned in, lowering my voice to a spectral murmur. “I am the ghost, actually.”

He pretended to startle, clutching his chest. “Really? Oh my...”

“Don’t be afraid,” I said. “I’m a well-educated ghost.”

“A civilized ghost, eh? What a pleasure.” His smile returned. “And where does this ghost reside?”

I told him of my village that borders a forest. A place where orchids unfold like secrets and moringa trees reach for the sun.

“I know it,” he said, his eyes lighting with recognition. “I live there with my grandmother.”

He paused, as if navigating an invisible map between us. “Is there an internet connection in your village?”

“Only the whispers from the radio and the stories from the television. And you?”

“I have a connection, the local internet.” He studied me. “Do you use it? Facebook? Twitter?”

“I don’t have a phone to buy data with. My parents believe some doors are better left closed.”

In return, I asked about his life. He was fourteen, a year younger than me, and carried a world of knowledge in his quiet demeanor.

“How many friends do you have here?” he asked.

“No one.”

His eyebrows lifted, genuine astonishment washing over his face.

“But you’re... I mean, you seem kind. You must have many.”

“The girls are envious,” I said, the old defense coming easily to my lips. “And I detest the boys who follow me. I rebuke them.”

“Do you despise me, then?” he asked, his gaze unwavering.

“There must be a reason to despise someone first.” I replied in a cold tone.

The mathematics teacher entered, and geometry equations soon filled the board. This was my realm, a world of precise lines and definite solutions. I lost myself in the logic. My pen flying across the page. Albert, I noticed, was struggling, his brow furrowed in frustration.

“Albert?” I whispered.

“Yes?”

“You’re skilled at this, aren’t you?”

He gave a faint, almost imperceptible shake of his head.

“Mathematics is a labyrinth for me. I enter and the walls immediately close in.”

“Don’t confront the labyrinth. Just follow the first mechanism of logic. It will lead you out.”

The teacher scrawled challenges across the board, granting us fifteen minutes of battle. My pen became a swift sword, solving six problems before the clock had ticked away five. Beside me, Albert’s page was a storm of frustrated scribbles. A wreckage of stalled equations.

“Sir, I’ve finished!” I called out, my voice too loud in the focused hush.

He came, inspected my work, and a pleased smile touched his lips, his nod approving. “Well done, Miss Broomhilda. Such speed & precision deserves a sweet reward.”

He pulled a Snickers bar from his pocket. The rustle of the wrapper was the sweetest sound. I took it. A flush of pride warming my cheeks.

When time was called, Albert’s page remained a testament to struggle. Later, in the silence after the storm, I guided him through each problem. He thanked me, but his face had taken on a pale, distant cast, as if he were listening to a worrisome sound only he could hear.

When the break bell rang, the room emptied for the canteen. Only we remained.

“Do you like sandwiches?” he asked, pulling a neatly wrapped lunch from his bag.

“No, thank you.”

“Not hungry?”

“No appetite.”

“Interesting,” he mused, his gaze thoughtful. “You are a different-natured girl.”

The phrase lingered, a peculiar compliment I didn’t know how to hold.

“Let’s go outside,” he suggested.

“Okay,” I said, tucking my hands into my pockets.

The schoolyard was a burst of sun and movement. The thump of basketballs. The sharp ping of table tennis. We stood beneath a sky of perfect sapphire, adrift with idle clouds, talking of comets and distant galaxies, of tidal forces and the possibility of alien life. The conversation was a stream carrying me away from myself, from the dread that had shadowed my morning. For a while, under the generous sun, I was just a girl discussing the universe with a boy who listened.

As he finished his lunch, his words turned to the cosmos.

“Have you heard of the Comet Galaxy?”

I hadn’t.

“It’s a spiral galaxy, 3.2 billion light-years away, being ripped apart. It’s losing the very stuff that makes new stars. It will end its life as a ghost of itself. A collection of old, red suns.”

“What force could do such a thing?”

“The slow, invisible violence of tidal forces. A gravitational betrayal.”

“Do you believe,” I asked, “that we are not alone in all that darkness?”

“I have to believe it,” he said, his voice steady. “A universe this vast, this inventive, cannot be meant for solitude alone.”

A breeze moved through the cedar tree beside us, and a nightingale answered from a hidden branch.

We spoke of films and stories until the bell called us back.

In chemistry class , our minds moved in parallel, solving reactions with the same instinctual rhythm. When the teacher asked for the methods of manufacturing nitric acid, our hands rose as one.

“State them together, then.”

“The Birkeland–Eyde process,” we recited in unison, our voices merging, “the Ostwald process, and the Retort process.”

The teacher looked impressed. The class looked intrigued. A current, subtle and electric, seemed to hum in the space between our desks.

The final class of physics passed in a blur. Then we were released into the amber light of late afternoon. I was quickening my pace toward home when his voice called from behind.

“Broomhilda?”

I turned. Albert stood a few paces back, his bag slung over one shoulder, the setting sun haloing his hair.

“If you don’t mind... our way home is the same. May I walk with you?”

“Of course.”

The path unwound before us, lined with hedges and breathing the sweet, hypnotic perfume of orchids. The air was rich with the scent of crushed herbs and the evening’s first dewy chill. The sun, a lurid orb of orange, melted into a horizon of pink and violet. Flocks of birds etched calligraphy across the fading blue. In the distant meadow, cattle grazed in peaceful silence. From a hidden radio, a fragment of melody wound through the twilight. It was a perfect, suspended moment.

Remembering the Snickers, I pulled it from my pocket. “Do you like these?”

“Snickers is Albert’s favorite,” he said, grinning.

I broke the bar in two, and we walked on, the shared chocolate sweet and nutty on our tongues. Too soon, we reached the fork in the path where our ways diverged.

“This is my turn,” he said, pausing. “Goodbye, Broomhilda.”

“Goodbye, Albert. See you tomorrow.”

I watched him go for a moment, a solitary figure dissolving into the gauzy, gold-tinted, gilded light, before I turned toward my own home. The taste of caramel and unexpected companionship. A gentle, fading warmth, lingering long after he had vanished from sight.

He vanished into the gathering dusk, and I walked briskly toward home with a new purpose beating in time with my steps. Tonight, I will unravel the mystery. I would ask Mary about the words that had haunted me all day: *Breast ironing*.

The evening unfolded like a tranquil art of decay. The sun bled into the western hills, staining the bellies of low clouds a magnificent, lucent ruby. A sight so vivid it felt like a salve to my very eyes. I crossed the old bridge. Its timbers humming with the river’s pleasant, ceaseless gurgle. Soon the familiar silhouette of our house rose against the twilight.

## The Silent Scream

**H**unger, sharp and sudden, gripped me. In the kitchen, I found a small feast waiting. Ears of boiled corn, their kernels plump and yellow. Fillets of salmon with skin crisped from the fire. I ate voraciously, the flavors a grounding comfort, before retreating to my room to shed my school uniform.

Changed and resolved, I went to find my sister. Her room was empty, a cave of shadows. So was my mother's. Only the blue flicker of the television leaked from my father's doorway.

"Papa, where are they?"

"In the woods. Gathering mushrooms," he said, his eyes not leaving the screen. His voice was a flat stone dropped into the quiet. "They'll be late. After your studies, prepare supper. Grill the eel, fry the rice."

"But if they're just foraging, shouldn't they be back by now?"

"There are other things to attend to," he said, a sentence that ended all discussion. He retreated behind his newspaper, a rustling wall.

Outside, the darkness was not falling but slithering. A slow, velvety creature swallowing the last remnants of day. A twilight breeze moved through

the trees, carrying the spellbinding, almost narcotic perfume of night jasmine. I bent over my homework, but the figures on the page blurred. In their place was a boy with intelligent eyes and a soft laugh. A mind that held galaxies and the definition of an ovary with equal ease.

My chores were a meditation in movement. The corn returned to the boil. Rice sizzling in oil. The eel laid on the grill. An omelet coaxed golden in a hot pan. By the time I finished, my watch read eight.

Mary's room was still a pool of darkness.

I switched on the light and froze.

It was a battlefield. Books were spilled across her bed as if thrown. Clothes lay in tangled heaps on the floor. The careful order she always maintained was shattered. This disorder was a silent scream.

Seeking noise, anything to fill the void, I turned on the radio. Michael Jackson's vibrant energy erupted into the room. For a few desperate minutes, I let my body move to the rhythm, a futile attempt to outrun the dread. I stopped before the mirror, my breath short.

"I am tired," I whispered to myself, looking in the mirror. "So tired of all this... business."

My own face looked back, a familiar stranger.

"But never too tired to seek my surface," the silence seemed to reply.

A hollow laugh escaped me.

"How are you tonight?"

"I am constant. And you?"

"Anxious. My sister... her room..."

"She carries a storm," my reflection seemed to say before I could finish the thought. "I hope it passes without breaking her."

The supper with my father was a quiet retreat. Then, the sound of the door. They were home.

My mother entered first. Her face a mask of grim purpose. And then came Mary.

I looked at my sister, and my breath caught. Her face was... hideous. Not in feature, but in spirit. It was faded, bleached of its usual vibrant light. She looked utterly drained. A vessel emptied. Dumbfounded, I could only stare. What had happened in those woods? Her eyes were twin pools of raw, red anguish. Had she drunk bitterness, or had she cried until there was nothing left? The lively glow that usually lit her from within was extinguished. I knew my sister's eyes. They were usually bright with secret jokes and future dreams. Now, they held only the cold, vacant aftermath of an explosion, like the dead light of a star that has burned out.

My mother and sister ate their supper in a silence as thick as the night. A single tear escaped my sister's eye, tracing a silver path down her cheek before falling onto her plate. Then, with a choked sound, she pushed her food away, rose brusquely, and fled to her room.

"Mom, what's wrong with her?"

"A cramp," my mother said, her voice toneless, her eyes on her own hands. "Just a sharp pain in her leg. It will pass."

But pain does not make eyes that dead. I went to her. The door was ajar. In the dim light, I saw the shuddering shape of her under the blanket. Her sobs muffled by the pillow. Raw, gulping sounds that seemed to shake the very air.

"Mary? Is it the cramp?"

"Yes," came the strangled reply.

"Can I rub it? Bring you oil?"

"No. It's... it's not so bad. I'll be fine."

I loved my sister with a ferocity that ached. To hear her cry was to feel a fracture open in my own chest. A consternation, cold and slick, coiled in my stomach. Then the thought, sudden and electrifying, shot through the haze of my worry.

I sat carefully on the edge of her bed. The words felt dangerous in my mouth.

“Mary,” I whispered. “What is breast ironing?”

The effect was instantaneous. She turned her head slowly from the pillow. In the gloom, her face was ghastly, every feature rigid with a terror so profound it seemed to etch new lines into her skin. Her eyes were wide, frozen lakes. Her lips, still glistening with tears, began to tremble.

“Is it...” I pressed, my own voice now a wisp, “...a sign of danger?”

She swallowed hard. The sound audible in the quiet room.

“Breast ironing,” she began, the words sticking in her throat. “It... medically... It’s a method. For making breasts... bigger.”

She said it plainly. I believed her. Only later did I realize how gullible I had been. The knowledge landed like an insult. Quiet, piercing, and impossible to brush away.

“Mom told you to do it. Today, right?”

Her pupils dilated into vast, black pools of shock. She looked as if the ghost I had pretended to be at school had just stepped into her room, solid and terrible.

“Yes,” she breathed, barely audible. “But not now. In two years, maybe.”

A naive, desperate hope surged in me.

“But that’s for her, not you! Your breasts, they’re... they’re growing gently. Like mine.”

I leaned closer, speaking with the false confidence of a child offering logic to a nightmare.

“Have you ever seen Mom’s breasts? They’re so small. Like little bird’s eggs.”

She stared at me for a long moment, a world of unspoken horror in her gaze.

“Yeah,” she finally said, the word hollow. Then she turned her face back into the pillow, a clear dismissal.

“Broomhilda, go. Go study. I’ll be better tomorrow.”

“Okay. Good night, Mary.”

A sound that was not a word, only an exhale, was her reply.

I returned to my room, but my mind was a cosmos in chaos. Galaxies of fear and suspicion whirled, colliding, forming dark new constellations I couldn’t name. My books were hieroglyphs. Their meaning was lost. The only escape was sleep.

I performed the evening duties by rote. The minty scrape of the toothbrush. The familiar give of my mattress. From the wardrobe, I took the small bottle of perfume and sprayed a mist over my sheets. The clean, calming scent of lavender, a spell for peaceful dreams. I crawled beneath the covers. The fragrance a frail shield against the dread lingering in the air. Closing my eyes, I let myself fall, not into sleep, but into the waiting cavern of my own dreams. Hoping to find a perfect place the waking world had suddenly failed to provide.

## The Art of the Spider

The morning arrived not with a clamor, but with a gentle insistence. Sunlight, warm and dear, kissed my eyelids until I woke. A chorus of birdsong, crisp and clear, glided through the calm breath of the morning wind. I rose, performed the small ablutions of face and teeth, and found my mother in the kitchen. Steam spiraled from the coffee pot's spout. A quiet, fragrant offering.

We gathered at the table, our meeting inaugurated by the sound of the first sip. My sister sat down, and the sunlight that fell upon her did not illuminate. It exposed. Her face was a deserted monument. All joyful life evacuated, leaving behind only the stark architecture of endurance. The warm light pooled in the hollows of her cheeks, making her skin look like dry, weathered wood. She seemed volatile, insubstantial. A girl slowly transducing from a solid state into a mournful, dissipating gas.

"Mom," I ventured, breaking the silence, "did you find good *Agaricus* in the woods yesterday?"

“We found some,” she said, her voice careful. “And a few toadstools, as well.”

It was then Mary spoke, her gaze fixed on the middle distance.

“I want the toadstool, Mom. I don’t want to live anymore.”

The words dropped into the quiet kitchen like stones into a still pond.

“Don’t be stupid!” My mother’s cry was sharp, a lash of sound.

“What’s going on?” My own voice was a panicked echo.

“Nothing, Broomhilda.” Mary turned her sharp, hollow eyes on me. “Focus on your studies. Don’t worry about me.”

“But why would you say that? What has happened to you?”

“I said, focus.” Her tone was final, a door slammed shut. “No further questions.”

I retreated to my room, the weight of her despair settling over me like a sodden cloak. The sounds of her moving in the kitchen. The chop of vegetables. The sizzle of chicken. All were strange counterpoint to the void in her eyes. I tried to lose myself in the cold logic of my chemistry book, but the symbols swam on the page.

A soft knock. I opened the door to find her there, attempting a smile that broke against the sadness in her face like a wave on a rock. She entered, holding out her hand.

“I brought you kola nuts.”

“Oh! My favorite.” I took them, the hard, brown shells familiar in my palm. “I love the bitter juice.”

“Remember, it’s a mild stimulant,” she said, her voice assuming its old, instructive tone for a moment. “Only a little. It’s good for you.”

“You do love me, don’t you?” The question escaped, raw and needy.

“Of course I do. You are my lovely sister.”

“Then why won’t you share your trouble with me?”

“Broomhilda...” She took a long, shaky breath, as if steadying herself on a ledge. “I will. I promise. But not now. When the time comes.”

“When the time comes,” I repeated, the phrase tasting of delay and dread.

“Yes. No more questions now, okay? You’re a good girl. Just wait. When the time is right, I will tell you everything.”

She pressed the nuts into my hand, her touch brief, and then she was gone, leaving behind the hollow echo of her forced smile and a handful of bitter seeds. I sat on my bed, placing one in my mouth. I closed my eyes as the initial, astringent burst flooded my tongue, followed by a slow, complex juice. A taste that was itself a secret. Both stimulating and melancholic.

Later, under the stream of my morning shower, I scrubbed my skin as if I could scour away the clinging worry. I dried my hair in the blazing sun, letting its heat bake into my scalp. At lunch, the meal Mary had prepared was delicious. The vegetables vibrant. The chicken fragrant. But every savory note on my tongue was bittersweet, haunted by the sight of her crumbling face.

Walking to school, the humid air felt viscous, like wading through warm broth. My heart was a condensed, heavy thing in my chest. Why was she building this wall between us? Metallic questions struck the anvil of my mind. Sharp and unanswered.

Then I saw it. Stretched between the branches of a Moringa tree, a spider’s web glistened in the sun’s dazzling rays. It was a masterpiece of geometry, art and patience. Each strand a gleaming filament of perfect purpose. I stopped, transfixed. How does such a small creature spin something so strong and so beautiful from its own body?

Every creature has its art, I thought. Some use it. Some have it silenced. We must be like that spider. We must spin, from the very substance of our souls,

webs of knowledge and imagination. Strong, intricate, and designed to catch the light, to gleam with a truth so vivid it cannot be ignored. I walked on. The image of that radiant web etched behind my eyes. A silent, defiant answer to the shadows gathering at home.

I reached the school just as the first bell's echo died in the courtyard air. For once, I was on time. Albert was already in his place on the last bench, a figure of quiet readiness amidst the morning chaos.

"Good morning," he said, his voice a low, warm note.

"Good morning."

"Did you sleep well?"

"Perfectly," I lied, the word smooth and practiced on my tongue.

The classes unfolded in their usual rhythm. Albert was a silent engine of intellect. His hand a constant signal in the air. His answers precise and clear. When the teacher departed and the room erupted into its customary din, our island of quietness returned. We spoke of textbooks and film plots, of mythology and anthropology.

During the break, beneath the wide, watchful sky of the school grounds, I asked, "Have you read *Beloved*? By Toni Morrison?"

"Yes," he said, and a shadow of profound feeling passed over his face. "It is the most haunting story I know. It won the Nobel Prize, didn't it?"

"It did. Written by a Black woman."

"Exactly," he nodded, a quiet pride in his voice. "I am her devoted reader."

"So am I."

The walk home that afternoon was under a different sky. A thick, livid membrane of clouds had been drawn across the sun, snuffing out the world's color. A chilling, racy wind had risen, twisting the branches of trees into agonized shapes. The familiar, sweet perfume of orchids had been swept away,

replaced by the metallic scent of impending rain. The very atmosphere hummed with a low-grade dread.

"Today is a full moon," Albert said, his eyes searching the leaden sky. "But she is hidden. I cannot see her."

"You love the moon?" I asked.

"Yes...in a way. She is a constant."

"I love her more than I can say," I confessed, the words feeling both too large and utterly true. "On most nights, she is my companion. My silent, luminous television that needs no plug, no power. Only a willing eye to watch."

"A selenologist," he said, a faint smile touching his lips. "That is what you wish to be."

"A selen... what?"

"A selenologist. A scholar of the moon."

"Precisely," I said, heartened. "That is what I dare to become."

"Marvelous," he whispered, just as a figure rounded the path ahead.

A European girl approached us. Her stride confident. Her blonde hair a stark contrast against the gloom. She wore a bright blue T-shirt and a short skirt. As she drew nearer, a change came over Albert so sudden and violent it stole my breath. His face, a moment ago soft with conversation, contorted into a mask of pure, unadulterated terror. He stared at her as if she were an apparition dredged from a nightmare. His hands began to shake, then his whole frame trembled as if seized by a palsy. I was stupefied, rooted to the spot.

Then he ran. He did not turn or excuse himself. He simply broke, bolting away from the path and crashing into the thicket beside the road with a desperate, maddened energy, as if the devil himself were at his heels.

The girl passed by with a curious glance, utterly unaware of the earthquake she had triggered. I stood alone in the gathering wind. My mind whirling. What specter had he seen in that ordinary face? What memory, what guilt, or what fear could provoke such a visceral flight? Had he stolen from her? Wronged her? The questions were a swarm in my head, stingers unsheathed.

\* \* \*

By the time I reached the bridge, the clouds broke. Cold rain needled down, and I fumbled for the umbrella I always carried. The rest of the walk was a haze of wet sound and chilling confusion.

At home, routine was a shallow comfort. I ate, changed, and opened my books, but on the white page, I only saw the image of him. The frantic, fleeing boy, galloping like a hunted thing. Why? The question hammered against the walls of my mind.

Later, I joined my father before the television's blue glow during the news hour, a program I usually avoided. I sought its bland, impersonal noise to drown out the personal echo of Albert's panic.

After supper, which my mother and sister missed, they arrived late, well past ten. My sister's face in the dim hallway light was a workshop of destruction. It looked worse, hollowed out, as if she were silently weathering a private torment. Who, I screamed inside, was doing this to her?

My room that night was a cavern of gloom. Lying in bed, I heard it. The faint, muffled sound of her sobbing through the wall. It felt alien. A distress signal transmitted from some distant, desolate exoplanet, perceptible only to

the hyper-tuned receiver of my dread. She cried alone, guarding the reason as if it were a top secret she could not disclose.

## The Erased Sentence

Dawn came not as a gentle unveiling, but as an assault. A thousand swords of light cleaved the darkness, and morning opened its fierce, golden eye upon the world. I rose, performed the mechanical rites at the tap. The shock of cold water. The minty scour of the brush.

Mary had made coffee. I took the mug, its warmth a fleeting counterfeit of comfort. When I looked at her, truly looked, the last of my hope curdled. She was not just tired or sad. She was destroyed. All smiles had evaporated from her lips, leaving a cracked, arid plain. The happiness that once animated her had desiccated, blown away like dust. Her eyes, those once-bright windows, were now shuttered and deviated, gazing at a point somewhere beyond this world, somewhere painfully ruined.

The silence between us was a living thing, heavy and wounded.

“Are you alright, Mary?” I finally asked, the words bitter with despair.

She attempted a smile. It was a ghastly, fragile gesture, like a moth trying to land on a flame.

“Yeah... I am absolutely fine.”

After a lunch I could barely taste, I went to school. Albert was waiting, an unreadable glint in his eyes.

“You were troubled by my... performance yesterday, right?” he said quietly.

“Troubled?” I whispered, the fury sharp in my throat. “You looked like a man seeing his own ghost. Why?”

“Closer,” he commanded, his voice a taut wire.

When I leaned in, his breath was warm against my ear, his confession a thin, desperate layer of sound.

“I am xenophobic.”

The clinical word hung between us.

“Xenophobic?”

“Lower your voice,” he hissed. “It means I am afraid. Deathly afraid of foreigners. Their faces, their voices... their very shadows feel like a contagion to me. That is why I run.”

“Idiosyncratic,” I breathed, the word a judgment and a marvel. “You are completely, terrifyingly idiosyncratic.”

A strange, pained smile touched his lips.

“I will choose to be happy with your remark.”

Later, in Math class, a sudden, sharp sound pierced the drone of the lesson, a girl, seized by a relentless, barking fit of hiccups. Her face flushed with the effort to contain the violent, involuntary gasps.

Albert moved with a calmness that felt surreal. He drew a bottle of mineral water from his bag, a simple, clear cylinder catching the light.

“Broomhilda, please,” he said, his voice serene. I shifted my knees, granting him passage.

The room watched, hypnotized, as this boy, who fled from blonde girls, walked with solemn purpose to the suffering one. He offered the bottle, not

like a boy to a girl, but like a priest offering a sacrament.

“Drink,” he said, his voice carrying in the stunned silence. “It will bring relief.”

She took it, her fingers brushing his, her eyes wide with surprise.

“Thank you, Albert.”

“My pleasure.”

The teacher stood, chalk frozen in his hand, utterly bewildered. The class stared as if a saint had just materialized between the quadratic equations.

“You are an altruist,” I told him on the walk home, the word feeling too small for the contradiction he embodied.

“No,” he said, his gaze fixed on the distant horizon. “I am the cruelest person alive. My heart is diamond. The hardest substance known.”

“Your heart is diamond,” I countered, the image coming clear, “but not the kind in a jeweler’s case. It is a celestial diamond, forged in impossible pressure. It is not hard. It is dense. It holds entire collapsed stars within it. And yes, it sparkles, but only after it shatters the light that tries to enter it.”

He stopped walking. For a long moment, he just looked at me, his eyes reflecting a universe of pain.

“You see too much,” he whispered.

\* \* \*

That night, after supper, I found my sister in her room. She was not just crying. She was in the final, silent stages of erosion. The tears on her cheeks were not falling. They were evaporating directly from her skin, as if her body’s

very water was abandoning her. The sound of her suffering had become a part of the house's atmosphere. A low-frequency hum of despair.

When I confronted my mother, her answer was the same flat tone: "A cramp. Just a leg cramp."

A cramp that lasted four weeks? A cramp that shrank a soul?

Then, as abruptly as it began, the season of weeping ended. My sister emerged one morning wearing a smile so bright it was blasphemous. Her eyes, once dull as graves, shone with a terrifying, borrowed light. Her heart seemed hydrated with a grotesque, manic joy. It was a performance more chilling than her despair.

And that is when I truly saw her. Saw what had been taken.

The soft, gentle curves of breasts that had begun to grace her chest were gone. Vanished. In their place was a terrifying flatness, punctuated only by the dark, ashen circles of her nipples, now looking like scars, like brutal punctuation marks on an erased sentence. They were smaller than my own budding breasts. A violent subtraction had been performed.

The world did not just tilt. It inverted. The air turned to fire, and I screamed inside a blazing pit of hellish desperation.

## The Wake

The wind of uproar arrived when my mother saw me walking with Albert. Her hand was a fiery strike, burning against my cheekbone before I could breathe. She dragged me into the private hell of our home.

“Who is that boy?”

“He is my friend. Albert.”

“Did he put his hands on you?” Her voice was a serrated blade. “Did you let him have sex with you?”

The vulgarity was a second slap. I was stupefied. The words dissolved before they reached my lips.

“Tell me!”

“He has never even brushed my hand!” I screamed, the truth a pathetic defense. “He is an enigma who is afraid of his own shadow!”

“Whatever,” she spat, the word a dismissal of my entire world. “It does not matter. Your time has come. Your sister has already passed through the breast ironing. Tomorrow, you will follow.”

The words made no sense.

"Passed through...? Her breasts are gone! They haven't enlarged, they've been... erased!"

"Of course they are gone!" she shouted, her composure shattering.

"That is the point! Breast ironing is not for enlargement. It is for annihilation. A hot stone. A heated pestle. You press, and you burn, and you press again, until the tissue dies. Until the promise is killed. It takes days. Sometimes weeks. Until you are flat. Until you are safe."

"Safe?" The word was a mockery.

"You are becoming a woman. Your body is a beacon calling every predator. This flattens the beacon. It makes you invisible. It makes you unrapeable. It safeguards your future."

"You are burning my future to save it!" I cried, the logic a dizzying abyss.

"It is the only way! When breasts grow, boys see only a green light for sex!"

The silence that followed was not empty. It was a mountain on my chest. I could not draw a full breath.

"I am protecting you," she said, and in her eyes, I saw the terrifying truth. She believed it. "Be ready at dawn."

"I will fight you," I whispered. The threat as fragile as an eggshell.

She laughed, a short, dry sound like crushing autumn leaves.

"Go to your room. Study. Dawn comes either way."

I did not go to my room. I went to my sister's. I opened her door and the truth hit me like a sickness.

"Why did you lie?"

She was silent for an eternity, her eyes huge in her ravaged face.

"She forbade me."

"Show me."

"Close the door."

I closed us in. She stood, a statue of shame, and slowly, with fingers that shook, she lifted her T-shirt.

I did not gasp. The sound that left me was a soft, devastating whimper, punched from my lungs.

There was nothing. No softness. No curves. No breasts. Just the terrible, stretched plane of her chest, marred by two dark, grayish-purple lesions where her nipples were. Islands of scar tissue in a sea of ruined flesh. They were not breasts. They were archaeological sites of a massacre. My mother had not just flattened her. She had mutilated the geography of her womanhood, scorching its terrain into a barren wasteland.

“Didn’t it... hurt?”

Her voice was ash. “It felt like my soul was being branded. Like she was pressing the hot iron directly onto my dreams.”

We stood there. Two girls in a silent room. And then the tears came. Not sobs, but a quiet, simultaneous overflow of a shared, bottomless grief. When she moved to embrace me, I saw her flinch. A jolt of raw pain from the wounded plain of her chest. She held me anyway, and in that agonized clasp, I felt the heat of her scars through our clothes, a terrible warning branded not just on her skin, but now forever on my soul.

Alone in my bed, the coming hours played out behind my eyes in a series of horrifying scenes. The sizzle. The smell of scorching skin. The smile of grim purpose. I rose, the night air cool on my skin. I opened my T-shirt. Sat before the dark window. Bare-chested. Slowly, as if touching something sacred and doomed, I cupped my own breasts. They were the soft, tender embryos of my womanhood, just beginning their silent, inevitable journey. Life, in its most innocent and persistent form.

And someone was preparing to murder them in their cradle.

The night deepened, a vast, indifferent ocean. Around me, the house breathed with the quiet lives of others, lost in their dreamy, untroubled skies. Sleep was a country I could not enter. I simply watched the black square of the window, a mysterious world beyond my wakefulness, until a fitful, haunted unconsciousness finally dragged me under, on the last tide before dawn.

## The Chamber of Hell

The night departed at the entry of breaking dawn, and it smelled of burning flesh.

The voice that pulled me from the abyss of fitful sleep was not a gentle call, but a stark pronouncement.

“It is time, dear. Be ready for the procession.”

Six o'clock. The hour of ritual.

I moved through the morning's motions like a spirit performing a pantomime of life. The shock of cold water on my face. The bitter mint of toothpaste. The searing heat of coffee that I did not taste. My father was conspicuously absent, swallowed by the fields or by a convenient ignorance. I would never know which.

The world outside was a spire of cruelty. The morning air was a seamless silk against the skin. A chorus of birds turned the atmosphere into music. The sun, a freshly awakened soul rising from the bed of the horizon, recharged with a blood-red splendor, began its slow ascent across the blue ocean of the sky. It was a cool, pristine morning. A mist cloaked the earth like a bridal veil,

gradually dissolving into gold under the sun's tender beams. The air was a narcotic bouquet. The haunting perfume of orchids. The deep, damp smell of roots and fertile woods. The chrysanthemum's spicy breath.

Everywhere, life proclaimed its glorious, oblivious persistence. The river's distant, melodious chuckle. Eons upon eons, the lofty, snow-clad mountain, lost in meditation, wears the dawn like a crown of gold. A tortoise's slow, deliberate pilgrimage across the path. The plaintive, pleasant mewing of cats. Dogs wagging in gleeful, simple rhythms. Crows in the woods, looking supremely satisfied with their black, glossy feathers. Seas of green fern, shimmering with dew. The tall, faithful Moringa trees. The morning bell's clear tone. Enticing spider webs, gleaming with moisture, strung between worlds. Dew trembling on the broad, heart-shaped leaves of Colocasia. The shocking architecture of birds' nests. The azure, unlimited sky. A fountain's cool whisper. The white, silent rock of the distant mountain. Rabbits leaping in mad, joyful bursts. The majestic, tattered flag of a banana leaf. The widespread, beautiful carpet of Bermuda grass. Even the clean, dry smell of desert air, carried from some far dune.

It was all fantastic, prodigious, a rapturous symphony to which I was now the condemned audience.

"Miss Foulata?" My mother's voice was a blade slicing through the beauty.

The neighbor appeared, her face arranging itself into a mask of somber recognition. Her eyes slid to me, assessing. "This is the daughter?"

"Yes. May we use the quiet room?"

"Of course. It is prepared."

"My thanks."

Then, to me, my mother uttered the command that severed me from the glorious, singing world: "Broomhilda. Come."

My heart was not beating. It was a frantic, mechanical throbbing, a vacuum pump trying to find air where none existed. A cold sweat sheened my body, making my clothes cling to me like a second, clammy skin. My legs trembled, their bones turned to water. A primal, paralyzing fear had stolen my voice. My resistance. My very exuberance. I was a sleepwalker in a waking nightmare, following the dark shape of my mother in silence, step by step. Completely oblivious and gullible.

She led me to a room at the back of the house. The door groaned open in a different universe.

The room was a graveyard of hope and dream. Almost vacant, save for a narrow, mean-looking cot. And in the center, a small, grim fire of coal burned within a ring of three soot-blackened stones. Its light was meager, malevolent, dancing over the instruments laid beside it with a kind of hungry anticipation. A heavy, dark iron. A flat spatula. Smooth river stones worn for purpose. A small, brutal-looking hammer.

The air was thick with dust and the obnoxious, sweet-rotten smell of long-closed spaces and old fear. This room had not been lived in. It had been used, exclusively and for years, for this single, sacred atrocity. The breast ironing. I could feel the echoes of other girls' silent screams vibrating through the walls, see the shadows of their terror wailing against the dead surfaces, caught in the sliver of morning light streaming from a single, high, filthy window.

*This was the altar. And I was the offering.*

My mother lifted a smooth, dark stone and placed it directly onto the heart of the glowing coals. It sat there, drinking the fire, becoming a vessel for concentrated heat. Her eyes, when they met mine, held no malice, only a terrifying, serene certainty.

"Now," she said, her voice unnervingly calm. "Open your T-shirt."

Miss Foulata's gaze was a physical weight, crawling over my skin as my trembling fingers fumbled with the hem. I drew the fabric over my head, and the room's cold, razor-sharp air grazed my bare chest. A last, fleeting, piercing kiss of the ordinary world.

"Your daughter is beautiful," Miss Foulata observed, her tone one of clinical appreciation. "And she has such lovely, promising breasts."

"Yes," my mother agreed, the word heavy with a perverted grief. "That is the very challenge. That is what I must protect her from. Would you grant us privacy?"

"Of course. The work must be done."

When the door closed behind her, my mother turned the key. The metallic click was the sound of the world locking me in.

"Lie on the bed," she instructed.

I obeyed, my body moving like a puppet with cut strings. The rough canvas of the cot scraped against my back. I watched her, my eyes wide, as she used a pair of iron tongs to lift the stone from the fire. It glowed a sinister, dull orange from within, like a piece of captured sunset meant to destroy.

Horror, pure and electric, jolted through me. I scrambled up, stumbling toward the door, my hands clawing at the solid wood.

"Do not dare run!" Her shout was a lash, freezing me in place. "This is not a negotiation. This lushness, this provocation, must be made flat. It is the only way."

My mind did not rebel. It emptied. It became a white, silent room where all thought and judgment had fled. Nimbly, I returned to the bed and lay back down, a sacrifice arranging itself upon the altar.

She approached. With one hand, she took hold of my left breast. Not roughly, but with a firm, possessive grip that was somehow more violating

than a blow.

“Do not cry,” she whispered, her breath close to my ear. “I am here. Your mother is here. Nothing bad will happen to you.”

Then she brought the stone down.

The world exploded into a single, all-consuming sensation. *FIRE* . Not on my skin, but in it, through it, a deep, bone-searing agony that felt less like heat and more like a pure, concentrated essence of pain being injected directly into the core of my being. A raw, guttural cry was torn from my throat. I shouted. I moaned. I twisted. But her arm was an iron bar, holding the stone in place with relentless, steady pressure. She was not just pressing. She was grilling me. I could smell it. The faint, nauseating scent of scorching skin. A smell that should never be associated with one’s own body.

She returned the stone to the coals. Her face a mask of focused intent.

“No more shrieking. No more tears. Be brave.”

But bravery had no language for this. When the reheated stone came down again, my scream was a thing that seemed to originate in my searing flesh and tear its way out through my mouth. The pain was no longer localized. It was a network of lightning. Branching through my chest, into my armpits, down my arms. My body arched off the bed, a bowstring pulled to breaking.

“Ah! AH! AHHH!”

Tears did not fall. They erupted. They spilled in torrents. Running into my mouth with the salt taste of terror. Dripping onto the canvas where they sizzled and vanished into the thirsty fabric, only to be immediately replaced by a fresh flood.

Next was the iron. It heated quickly in the eager fire, its flat face soon glowing a pale, malignant red. She did not hesitate. She pressed it against my right breast.

This pain was different. Sharper, more precise, a branding. My amplified shriek reverberated off the bare walls. A trapped animal sound that filled the *Chamber of Hell* and echoed back at me, mocking my agony. It was an unendurable, consciousness-shattering assault.

“Noooooooo, Mama! Please, please stop! I can’t... I can’t bear it!” I begged, my voice ragged.

“Silence,” she commanded, a bead of sweat tracing a path through the soot on her own temple. “This is for your life.”

She pressed again. And again. I cried until my throat was raw. My energy squandered in the futile economy of anguish. A wave of pain traveled across my body, a seismic shock that left tremors in its wake. In that moment, the woman hovering over me with a red-hot tool shed the last vestige of motherhood. She was not my protector. She was an artisan of ruin. A devil meticulously burning away my youth, my symbol, my very identity.

When she turned to reheat the iron once more, a primal instinct overrode the paralysis. I rolled. I stumbled. I fled. My bare feet slapped against the cold floor. I fumbled with the lock, threw open the door, and burst into the blinding, beautiful morning, running for the sanctuary of the nearby woods in nothing but my skirt. My burned chest exposed to the cruel, sweet air.

A bare, blue sky grinned above me, while my entire being coiled into a dense, roiling mass of destruction.

Between the trees, I fell to my knees, great, heaving sobs wracking my frame. Tears leapt from my chin onto my seared flesh, each drop a tiny, fresh torment. I looked down. The skin was an angry, blistering crimson, already purpling in places, patterned with the grim geometry of the stone’s edge and the iron’s flat plate. I was charred. Marked.

The forest, tranquil and dappled in green-gold light, watched in silent complicity. No one came. Only, eventually, my mother's voice, sharp and furious, sliced through the birdsong as she found me.

"Foolish girl! You make it harder on yourself!"

I fall silent, like leaves drifting to the ground, without a sound.

## The Unhappy One

**A**t home, my mind was a devastated city. Coherent thought was impossible. The pain was not a memory. It was a living, churning entity in my chest. Sending waves of nausea and hot throbbing through my body with every heartbeat.

“No school today,” she announced, as if discussing the weather. “We will continue the procession this evening.”

The betrayal was absolute. The glorious morning outside the window was a lie. The birds’ enchanting calls were a chorus of elegies sung for the girl I had been. The very world seemed to burn in a sympathetic fever. The gusty air felt hot against my wounds, and I trembled as if hot cinders were already swirling around me, ready to turn my soul to ash.

Twilight came, digesting the light, and with it, a fresh terror. Goosebumps rose on my skin, unrelated to the chill. She took me back. Not to a room. To the Chamber of Hell.

This time, it was a small hammer, its head heated in the coals. She did not press. She tapped. A sharp, fragmenting, escalating agony with each light,

precise blow. A cobbler hammering a nail of fire into my flesh. My shrieks grew hoarse, trapped in my ruined throat. The tears were automatic now. A saline IV drip of despair.

The night deepened. The pain replicated itself, breeding in the dark. After an hour, I was no longer a girl. I was a husk. A soulless thing on a dirty cot. My energy was spent. Only a traumatized brain flickered in my skull, a bare bulb swinging in an empty warehouse.

"I do not want these to grow," she stated flatly at home, gesturing at my chest as if pointing out a flaw in her weaving.

"What if they do?" I whispered, the act of speaking an effort.

Her eyes were flint.

"Then I will press them again. And again. The tradition is active until the work is done. Until you are flat."

She was no longer just my mother. She was inflexible. Rigid. A cold, geological force.

The next day, and the day after, we returned. Each session, a further erosion. The usual tears, the usual shrieks, the usual invasion of my body's integrity. Day by day, I felt my happiness and confidence not just leave, but be scorched out of me. The very soul within my body seemed to be burning alongside my flesh.

My breast tissue was not just pressed. It was profusely, systematically destroyed. I became a dark cavern, a place where sunlight could never again penetrate. Where only the echoing memory of heat and the lingering smell of my own burning remained. I was being unmade, transformed from a person into a warning. A living lesson written in scar tissue and pain.

I was a failed star.

\* \* \*

After a week of ritualized violence, the ruthless ceremony was complete. My breasts were not just subdued. They were deleted. The soft, nascent and nubile curves that had been the tender embryos of my womanhood were flattened into a taut, scarred plain. The promise of my youth had been murdered in its cradle, killed before it could ever touch the fresh, exhilarating sky of its own becoming. And with it, the dreams I had built in the secret realms of my heart, of a pilot's freedom, of a selenologist's gaze upon the moon, of a body that was wholly and joyfully my own, were also scorched and flattened. They became ash, indistinguishable from the ruins of my flesh.

I was bestowed a new, silent title: *The Unhappy One*. The Pessimist. My mind, once a garden of curious thoughts, was now a traumatized field, littered with the shrapnel of that week. Focusing on the neat lines of text in my schoolbooks was impossible. The letters swam and morphed into the shape of the hot stone, the glowing iron. I sat in my classroom like a desiccated tree, wrapped in an arid silence so blighted it felt like a second soul.

Everyone seemed cheerful except me. I remained suspended in a thick layer of pain. Ruined and rejected. Forced to flee the warm embrace of acceptance and joy.

I was walking on a path. The path of a loss. The path of an end.

They were dazzling chandeliers beneath the warmth of a loving home. I was a lone streetlight shimmering through a winter night.

## A Finite Number

**T**hrough that silence, Albert remained a constant. A gentle pressure. He was a lighthouse in my new, perpetual fog.

“Broomhilda,” he would ask, his voice lowered so only I could hear, “What storm sits behind your eyes?”

But the words to describe the tempest, the smell of scorching skin, the sound of my own screams absorbed by dark walls, would not form.

My horror: a word without letters. My mind: a Himalaya stripped of its snow. I am a sea without a shore. A night without stars. A dream without desire. A temple without a god.

Yet, he persisted. He became my shapes in geometry. My translator in chemistry. His quiet patience an ointment on wounds he could not see. He told me absurd facts about distant galaxies, trying to lure a smile to the surface with the sheer scale of astronomic wonder. He was, drop by careful drop, trying to fill the cavern of my sadness.

But every touch was a reminder. Adjusting my blouse, washing my body, my own fingers would inadvertently brush against the ruin of my breasts, and

a sharp, lightning-bolt of pain would lance through me, a brutal echo of the fire. It was a pain of loss and collapsed reality. An agony for what was missing.

My sister moved through the house with the same careful, pained posture, a fellow wraith in our haunted home. Her own body bore the grotesque signature of the ritual. Her breasts had begun a stunted, cruel regrowth, but asymmetrically. One had dared to become normal-sized, a betrayal of the flatness demanded of it. While the other remained a small, inconspicuous monument to its own destruction.

One evening, she came to my room as I sat staring, unseeing, at an open book. Her face was not just gloomy. It was the color of weathered slate. All light leached out.

"I need to tell you something," she said, her voice a dry leaf crushed beneath a foot. "Something... blue."

She sat on the edge of my bed, her hands clasped tightly in her lap, as if holding herself together. "I had a mammography today."

The clinical word hung between us, foreign and menacing. "A mammography?"

"It is a kind of... diagnostic X-ray," she explained, her voice hollow with rehearsed calm. "For the breast. They compress it... to see inside. To see if there is cancer."

A coldness, deeper than any fear I had yet known, began to spread from my core.

"And?"

The word was a pebble dropped into a fathomless well.

She did not cry. She simply stated it. A fact as solid and final as the earth.

"I have it. Breast cancer."

The air left the room. I gasped, a sound that was no sound at all, just the vacuum of a world collapsing.

“So,” she continued, looking not at me but at some point on the far wall, “my days are now a finite number. A countdown has begun inside me. I am... so sad to have to leave you.”

“No!” The denial was ripped from me, violent and desperate. “Don’t say that! It can be treated! There are surgeries, medicines...”

Her eyes finally met mine, and in them I saw a crushing, adult exhaustion.

“With what money, little Broomhilda? With what fortune? We live in a village where they burn our dreams to save us. They will not pay to un-burn the consequences.”

A single, perfect tear escaped, tracing a path through her despair.

“Death has already written his name on my chart. He is just waiting to collect.”

She began to sob then, not with the hysterical cries of the ironing room, but with the deep, shuddering grief of someone reading their own obituary. At that moment, the Chamber of Hell did not feel like a room in Miss Foulata’s house. It felt like it had metastasized. It had spread from our seared skin into the very tissue of our lives. Now growing, uncontrollably, inside my sister’s chest. A final, devastating harvest from the seeds of protection they had sown.

At last, the sun sank into the breasts of the verdant hills. And I sank into the embrace of the cold night.

\* \* \*

Time did not pass. It spun in a dizzy, cruel vortex, yet each day also stretched and slithered, a serpent of grief moving with agonizing slowness. The world had taken on a muffled, underwater quality, every sound dulled, every color bleached of its vitality. And so, six months slipped by in a fragile wisp of time.

It was a Tuesday morning. The act of brewing coffee was a flash of a routine, my hands moving without instruction from my conscious mind. Steam rose, a fleeting spirit. I carried a cup to my sister's door, a pointless offering to a shrine I could no longer enter.

"Mary?" I called, my voice thinning into the departing breeze. No answer. Only a profound, humming silence remained. A resonance in the void.

"Mary, wake up." I knocked, the sound too loud in the hallway's hush. A cold finger, premonitory and slick, traced the length of my spine.

"Sister, please!"

My father, drawn by the panic tightening my voice, came with a face already hardening against a blow he sensed coming. He called her name once, a bass note of dread, before throwing his shoulder against the door.

The jamb splintered with a sound like a bone breaking.

And there she was.

My sister was an effigy of stillness in her bed. The early morning light, so gentle and hopeful, fell across her face and found no life to illuminate. Her eyes were closed not in slumber, but in life's absolute and final surrender. One hand lay curled near her cheek, as if she had been brushing away a tear or a bad dream when the greater darkness took her.

The world did not go black. It shattered into a million blinding, white shards of pure, unbearable truth. A sound wrenched from me. Raw and heart-rending scream expelled from the vague tunnel of my throat, as if the sight had physically punched my soul from my body. Then the tears came, not as drops

but as a torrential, drowning rain from the suddenly storm-racked sky of my eyes. My knees buckled. The weight of the universe, of her absence, collapsed upon me, and the light rushed away as I spiraled down into a silent, welcoming nothingness.

I swam back to consciousness in the deep well of night, in my own bed. For a blessed, confused moment, there was only the softness of the sheet and the familiar pattern of shadows on my ceiling. Then memory, a serpent, struck. It did not return in a flood, but injected itself. A single, spiny, paralyzing truth.

*Mary is dead.*

The realization was a physical revulsion. I threw off the covers, my body moving with a frantic energy. I had to see her. I had to witness the fact to believe it, to say goodbye to the vessel that had held her light. I rushed from my room, down the hall. But her door stood open, a yawning, empty mouth. The bed was made, stripped bare. The room was neat, airless, a museum exhibit already prepared. She was gone.

A low, keening sound led me to my mother's room. She sat on the floor, her body folded in on itself, shaking with silent sobs that seemed to tear at her very framework.

"Where is she?" My voice was a stranger's, scraped raw. "Where is her body?"

My mother lifted a ravaged face.

"Gone. Reduced to ash."

The words were like snow, dissolving under the warmth of the sun.

"At the crematory. The one deep in the forest, where the white orchids grow."

I turned and ran. Not out the door, but through it, as if my body could outpace the horror in my heart. The night forest was a somber shrine of

shadows and sorrowful whispers. My bare feet slapped against cold earth and tangled roots. A carpet of desiccated leaves shattered underfoot, each step a brittle crackle. The sound of death itself. The famed orchids were there, glowing like pale, mournful faces in the moonlight, their sweet perfume now the scent of funeral incense.

Through the trees, the clearing appeared. A field of silent stone sentinels. I moved among them, my breath sobbing in my throat, reading names etched in grief. And then I found it. Simpler than the others, newer, the earth still dark and raw around it.

MARY VANE

BORN: 1996 A.D.

DIED: 2012 A.D.

Sixteen years. Reduced to a dash between two dates.

My legs gave way. I folded onto the damp earth before the stone, the cold seeping through my thin nightdress. Here was the final, impossible geography. A plot of grass, a carved rock. This was where they had put the person who braided my hair too tight, who shared secrets under a blanket's tent, whose laughter was a specific, golden sound now permanently erased from the atmosphere. The one who inspired me to look at the moon was now buried beneath it. The one who beat me at races and laughed until she cried was now ash and silence. The body that had hugged me, that had flinched from my touch over seared wounds, was now dissolved into the indifferent soil.

The person who loved me was nowhere. The person who cared was sleeping in a box of earth. The person who was my first friend had been melted by a heat far greater than any iron. The absolute, cold fire of oblivion.

She loved me truly. Not because I was strong, but because I was fragile.

She is now at eternal rest, sleeping peacefully in death's embrace.

The night deepened around us, the moon climbing higher, casting a blue-silver sheen over her name. It felt like a vigil we were sharing, just the two of us, though only one of us could breathe the cool air. Finally, with trembling hands, I reached for the orchids growing at the edge of the clearing. One by one, I plucked them, their stems snapping with soft, final sounds. I held the bouquet, a burst of living beauty against the grey stone, and then let them fall from my fingers, showering her grave in a rain of white petals.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered to the earth, to the ash, to the sister who could no longer hear. "I'm so sorry I couldn't save you."

A lost smile. A lost warmth. A lost feelings.

Then I stood, my body aching as if aged a century. I turned my back on the stone, on the petals, on the most profound loss of my life. As I walked away, step by step, the night surged in behind me, eager to envelop her grave, to swallow the evidence of my tears, and to begin the long, dark labor of making this new, unthinkable reality into something ordinary. The world.

## The Gardener of Death

I am not alone. I am one of many. A silent sisterhood of the scarred. Across villages, behind closed doors, girls like me have become unwilling offerings on the altar of a brutal, barbaric tradition. *Breast ironing*. The very phrase is a lie, a clinical euphemism for a slow, sanctioned burning. It isn't tailoring. It's torture.

The damage is not a single event but a permanent tenant in the body, a corrosion that works its way from seared tissue into the very marrow of the mind.

The physical legacy is a catalog of quiet horrors. In the homes of the fortunate rich, they use constricting elastic belts, a slow, bloodless strangulation of development. For the rest of us, it is the stone, the pestle, the iron. My body now hosts a memory of fire. I am prone to abscesses. Deep, angry pockets of infection that swell beneath the scar tissue, throbbing with a heat that mocks the original burn. There is constant itching, a phantom torment on nerve-endings left confused and raw. Fevers come without warning, as if my body is still trying to fight off the invasion of that week-long

violation. The tissue is not just flattened. It is damaged in a fundamental way, its architecture of ducts and glands scrambled into uselessness.

I learned the cruelest consequence from a whispered conversation among women: my breasts are now unproductive. The miraculous modification that turns a body into a source of life, the ability to nourish a future child with my own milk, was incinerated along with the fat and flesh. I heard of a desperate, horrific remedy: using driver ants, their vicious bites meant to provoke a swelling, a cruel mimicry of fertility. The injustice is a geometric shape, endlessly reflecting: one woman, maimed by another, who was maimed before her, all to appease a fear seeded by men. What greater insult to womanhood exists than this systematic destruction of its physical poetry, this preemptive theft of a future nurture?

The mirror is now my enemy. In its silvered surface, I do not see a young woman. I see a confused, androgynous form, a body whose natural map has been deliberately erased. The gentle slopes that should signal a coming-of-age are replaced by a stark, boyish flatness. With each glance, a little more of my confidence evaporates. In school, my performance has withered. Numbers and words lose their meaning against the constant, low hum of bodily betrayal. I see dark shadows everywhere. Not just in corners, but in people's eyes. In the dappled light under trees. In the future that stretches before me, a long tunnel of shame.

Through this gathering darkness, Albert remains. A steady, quiet star in my personal night. He was a blooming flower with a beaming heart. His friendship has been a patient, persistent question against my silence. And finally, I have understood the language of his care. It is not just kindness. It is love. A gentle, unwavering regard that sees the girl, not the ruins. He crafts jokes out of celestial facts. Shares his Snickers as if they were sacred sweets. And his

mission seems to be the seemingly impossible. To coax a genuine smile back to my face, to lure it up from the profound, solitary canyon where it had fallen and shattered.

This growing tenderness for him exists in fierce opposition to a new, seething hatred I harbor for the woman who gave me life. I despise her genetic inheritance in my veins. She spoke the language of protection while wielding instruments of mutilation. She did not just destroy my breasts; she shattered the sacred trust at the heart of motherhood, turned my body into a battleground, and my heart into a casualty. Was she truly my mother? If this was the fruit of her womb, then I recoil from the very thought of her parturition canal. I curse the passage that brought me into her violent, misguided care.

The obscene stupidity of it all screams in my head. To protect pubescent girls from rape, they mutilate the girls. They scorch our potential, our beauty, our function. But why not address the source? Why not teach their sons, with fierce and unwavering clarity, that a woman's body is not an entitlement, that desire is not a license, that "no" is a complete sentence? Why is the solution to dim the lighthouse rather than teach the sailors not to wreck themselves upon the rocks? I know the answer. A thick, suffocating silence around the word "sex." A silence that breeds shame, then blossoms later into the grotesque flower of harassment and assault. The mutilation is not just of flesh, but of truth.

I have come to a stark conclusion that every form of genital mutilation, on any body, is a crime against humanity. It is a theft of autonomy, a scarring of the soul. And with a grief that cracks my world, I must now name my parents, the people I was born to love, as criminals. They were the willing executioners of a tradition that masquerades as care. And in my sister's case, they were more

than that. The cancer did not kill Mary in a vacuum. My mother, with her hot stone and iron will, sowed the very seeds of that chaos in the tender, traumatized soil of her breast. She created the conditions for the rebellion of cells. She was the gardener of that death.

## A Sunrise Smile

**I** *was running, yet the distance had not decreased. I had grown taller, yet I remained where I was. I was alive, yet I didn't know how to live.*

The outer world moves on, indifferent to my inner ruins. The weather turns. A crispness enters the air, the herald of a winter that feels fitting. Flowers bow their heads, inflorescence fade and fall. The juicy, hopeful green that once resided in my heart has undergone a brutal plasmolysis. The living protoplasm has shrunk away from the walls, leaving a hollow, shriveled thing behind. The days themselves feel like they are evaporating, leaving behind only a residue of memory and pain.

Yet, life's mundane rituals persist. We had final exams. By some miracle of rote memorization, an apparition of my former self passing through the motions, I passed every subject. And Albert, my brilliant, gentle Albert, emerged as the top of our class.

"Congratulations, Albert!" I said, the words feeling strange on my tongue, an attempt at normalcy.

He didn't reply with words. Instead, he reached into his pocket and produced a familiar, crinkled wrapper. A Snickers bar. He held it out, not as a reward, but as a quiet, shared talisman.

"Today is my birthday," he said softly, like a confession.

The words pierced me. Their simplicity, their sweetness amid so much bitterness. Here was a bright soul, trapped inside a dark and murky mist.

"Happy birthday, Albert."

The wish felt like the first genuine gift I had offered anyone in months.

"Thank you," he said, a faint color rising on his cheeks. "But... don't tell anyone. Please."

"Strange," I murmured, curious at his shyness.

"I blush too easily. The attention... it feels like a spotlight on a creature that should remain in the shadows."

I understood the shadows. "Oh."

He gently steered us away from himself.

"So, tell me. How are you? Truly? How are things in the kingdom of Broomhilda?"

I looked at his earnest face, at the Snickers bar held between us like a peace offering, and for a fleeting second, the armor of my sadness cracked. I gave him the old, automatic answer, the one that meant nothing and everything. "As smooth as fabrics."

And then he laughed. Not a polite chuckle, but a rich, unfettered, boisterous sound that seemed to rush into the stale air around us and stir it into life. It was a laugh that carried the weight of his own hidden struggles and chose joy anyway. His smile, in that instant, was not just a movement of lips. It was a sunrise. It broke over his features with such warmth and genuine light that, for a heartbeat, I felt my own frozen spirit shudder. A faint, almost

forgotten warmth flickered in the deep cavern of my chest. In the radiant aftermath of his boisterous laugh, I felt the terrible, beautiful, and haggard sensation of my own life. Dormant and numb. Finally begin. Very gradually....to animate once more.

*It was as if he was creating something from nothing.*

## Starstuff

Under the ancient cedar tree at the edge of the schoolyard, he found me at my usual spot, a root-gnarled island in the sea of laughing students. I was staring at a biology textbook, the words swimming like tadpoles on the page.

“The Krebs cycle is too complex,” Albert said, settling beside me without asking. “All that twisted cycles. Too boring and lame.”

I didn’t look up. “It’s just words.”

“Words are a miraculous tool,” he said, his voice low. “They can shape a soul where hope resides, strip away fear, and give birth to new understanding. Or they can annihilate every possibility before it has a chance to breathe. They are a double-edged sword. Now, watch.”

He opened his own book. Not a textbook, but a tattered paperback of Carl Sagan’s *Cosmos*. He cleared his throat and began to read, not to me, but to the air between us.

“The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We

are made of starstuff.”

He paused. The word iron hung in the air, a coincidence that felt like a cosmic whisper.

“They used iron to collapse you,” he said, his gaze steady on the horizon. “But you see, Broomhilda? You are also made of what collapses stars. You are not the collapse. You are the material that remains. The starstuff. The potential for new suns.”

He placed the open book in my lap. His finger rested near the sentence. We are a way for the cosmos to know itself.

For the first time since the pain, a thought pierced the fog that wasn't about pain. It was about composition. My body, even in its ruined state, was made of elements forged in stellar furnaces. The iron that scarred me was the same element that carried oxygen in my blood, that gave Mars its red hue. I was not just a victim. I was a universe in miniature. A battlefield of cosmic elements. The trauma was a violent reaction, but I was still the experiment. And experiments yield data.

I touched the words on the page. They felt cool. Solid.

“Starstuff,” I whispered.

Albert nodded, a small, satisfied smile on his face. He had just given me my first new vocabulary word since the horror. It was not a medical term. It was a cosmic one. The reaction had begun.

## Missionary Library

**T**he abandoned missionary library, late afternoon.

Shortly after Albert begins sharing astronomy books with me, he takes me to the library.

The library was a vast hall of forgotten wisdom. Sunlight, bright with dancing particles, fell in diagonal shafts through high, grimy windows, illuminating the long oak tables. The air smelled of primordial sentiments. The glue surrendering. Paper yielding to time. A thousand stories sleeping upright on shelves.

Albert moved with a reverent familiarity.

“It’s not locked,” he whispered, his voice part of the library’s hush.

I trailed my fingers along a row of spines. Leather flaked like dried skin. *Botany of the Central Plateau. Colonial Hydrology. The Firmament and Its Stories.*

“Here,” Albert said.

He stood before a low shelf, removed a thick volume bound in faded blue, and blew across its top. A cloud of dust erupted, a miniature supernova in the sunbeam. He offered it to me.

The book was heavier than it looked. *Atlas of the Lunar Surface, 1961*. I opened it. The pages crackled in protest. And there she was. Not the distant sphere in the sky, but a world. A cracked, pocked, magnificent world. Craters named for philosophers. Seas of basalt, silent and cold. Rugged highlands that had never felt a breath of wind.

“They mapped her,” I said. “They gave her scars names.”

Albert watched my face. His eyes silent. His lips shut tight. His gaze was a cool touch from heaven.

The thing I wanted most, I never had to search for. It was always there. In silence. In darkness. Waiting. And when I finally lifted the curtain of fear, it revealed itself to the light. It was what I had wanted all along

“They honored her geography. Every impact. Every ridge. They didn’t call it ruin. They called it history.” He finally spoke.

My throat tightened. In that moment, the dust in the air, the weight of the book and the named desolation on the page, all coalesced into a truth so sharp it stole my breath. My chest, with its silent, scorched plains, was also a landscape. Unmapped, unnamed, its history recorded only in pain. What if I could be the cartographer of my own scars? Not to forgive their making, but to claim their territory as my own?

A tear fell, not of sadness, but of fierce, sudden recognition. It hit the page, darkening the Sea of Crises into a blurred, personal stain.

“Thank you,” I said to Albert, but my eyes were on the moon.

I was not looking at a dead rock. I was looking at a sister in silence. A body that had endured cataclysm and still held its orbit, still reflected the sun, still pulled at the tides of a girl a world away.

At the library desk, bent over our shared book on selenology, Albert leaned in close to me. He gazed at me intently, his voice softening to a melancholic

tone:

“For you, I would do anything. I have gathered flowers and painted your heart with every color of hope. So tell me, Broomhilda, why are you still so sad?”

My mind plunged into a dead silence. I didn't feel surprise. I was overwhelmed by the sudden eruption of feelings that had long been trapped within my heart. Though my eyes were dry, my heart cried out with the force of a thousand waves crashing against the shore of my fate. To be so loved, yet so profoundly sad. What could be more tragic than this?

\* \* \*

At home, strange thoughts shimmered across the sky of my mind. So I sat down to write a poem, setting Albert, brimming with grandiose lives, against myself, weighed down by futile dreams. With a pained heart I moved my fingers and the words begins to appear, one by one, like the stars in the night sky:

*You and I*

You are the graceful light of nirvana;

I am only its distorted shadow.

You are the roaring, towering flame of dreams;

I am the icy ashes of forgotten reality.

You are attractive life;

I am distractive death.

You are the gravity of hope;

I am an infinite well of doubts.  
You are rejoicing revelation;  
I am sad demonstration.  
You are the fusion of love and hope;  
I am the nova of hatred and illusion.  
You are the warm mystery of origin;  
I am the cold truth of an ending.

You are the new excitement of adventure;  
I am the hideous fall of dejection.  
You are a dense mass of examples;  
I am a weightless, worthless idea.  
You are composed thought;  
I am decomposed insanity.  
You are a preserved specimen of discovery;  
I am a dumped, shattered skeleton beyond recovery.  
You are exposed stimulation;  
I am suppressed gratification.  
You and I, two completely different entities.

I stopped my pen. Darkness unfurled its infinite black wings over the world,  
and I, a little fading candle, was finally extinguished in silence.

## The Air of Freedom

I beheld Hesperus, the evening star. Not just a point of light, but a solitary, piercing pale pearl being slowly pinned to the twilight's soft, gray velvet. It was a signal. One by one, as if answering a silent, celestial summons, stars emerged. They did not appear. They declared themselves. A glittering multitude. A diaspora of diamonds. Countless tiny disco balls twinkling in the vast, domed ballroom of the heavens. The world was not just lit. It was dressed in a glory so profound it felt like a secret being whispered directly to my soul.

Around me, the air was not empty but a live music. Whooshing through the trees. Compelling their branches into a slow, silent ballet. A personal breeze, intimate as a confessor's breath, lifted the strands of hair from my forehead. The old juniper stood nearby, cloaked in a shadow so deep it seemed woven from the fabric of time itself.

At my feet, the world condensed. A grasshopper, an emerald cog in the night's machine, alighted, trilled a cryptic, three-note song into the gathering gloom, and vanished as if it had never been.

Then the scent arrived. The hypnotic, narcotic perfume of evening primrose. It did not float. It thickened the air, so palpable I could feel it coating my throat. The very breeze seemed to be performing a languid, aromatic belly dance, its movements traced by the intoxicating swirl of pollen and fragrance. From the darkness, a symphony coalesced. The rhythmic notes of unseen insects, the distant rustle of something both small and momentous, the liquid gossip of a hidden stream. I felt the solid edges of myself begin to dissolve. I was slipping, not into sleep, but into a waking, breathing fantasy.

In the blurred distance, a silhouette stood against the fading crimson and indigo of the west. A windmill. Its sails stilled. A stark paper cutout of forgotten industry. Thickets and flowers surrendered their colors to the dusk, becoming studies in monochrome, in memory. Birds, like the final, decisive strokes of a painter's brush, swept across the vast canvas of the sky, returning to nests as the day gently closed its eyes.

And then, she arrived.

The moon ascended. Not rose, but ascended. Full, majestic, a sovereign claiming her domain. Her familiar silver light did not fall. It poured, a silent, sedative river washing over the world, bleaching worry from the landscape. The gentle gurgle of a nearby fountain provided a liquid, looping counterpoint to the immense silence. Beyond, the land rolled away into majestic hills and dreaming plateaus that melted, like a watercolor left in the rain, into the distant, dark smear of woods.

A miracle detached itself from the shadows. A vibrant butterfly fluttered toward me, a living mosaic of impossible colors. Sapphire, emerald, beaten gold. It settled on my arm. Its weight was less than a particle. I watched, breathless, as its wings pulsed with a slow, sacred rhythm. When I reached out

to touch this breathing beauty, it did not fly. It dissolved, scattering into a thousand waves of moonlight that danced away on the same perfumed air.

I saw them then. Two small deer, materialized at the fountain's edge. They drank with a delicate, desperate urgency, their heads bowed in a silent prayer. Under the moon's sovereign gaze, they were rendered ethereal, woven from silver thread and shadow. Finishing, they bent their elegant necks to softly lick their slender, beautiful legs. An act of ablution so pure it ached to witness.

Compelled by a gravity not of this earth, I turned and began to walk toward the distant windmill. For an hour, or perhaps an eternity, I walked. The cold night air was a swift, cleansing knife against my skin. The soundtrack of the world had turned wild, untamed. The primordial, hollow howl of wolves splicing the dark from the woods. The incessant, metallic rasp of crickets filing the edge off the silence. The windmill remained a taunting dream, a shimmer on the horizon. I clambered down a rocky slope. My hands scraping against cold stone, and found not a path, but a way out.

A wide, dark tunnel opened in the hillside, an entrance of pure oblivion. A shortcut, I hoped.

Inside was a world of pitch blackness. It was a place of fear and mystery, where sound had texture and silence is dense. I moved by braille, my hands feeling the chilling, weeping scripture of the moist rock. Sometimes, I crawled, my knees grinding into the gritty floor, my world reduced to the next inch of stone. Strange, damp smells of fungal secrets. The smell of mineral rocks filled my nostrils. Odd, echoing drips punctuated the void. Each one dripping like a liquid clock in a dark space. Bats whispered past, their passage a disturbance in the air more felt than seen. The soft leathern rustle of their wings like turning pages in a book of spells. My entire existence narrowed to a single, distant pinprick of light at the tunnel's end. A promise, a pearl, a pupil in the eye of the

earth. In that profound, pressurized stillness, the vibrations of the planet hummed up through the rock. I could hear it. The deep, subsonic sound of the world, spinning in its own orbit.

Finally, I emerged. And I stood, utterly perplexed.

The moon was not in the sky. She was the sky. She was not just shining. She was spilling, vomiting light. She loomed like a lurid, luminous topaz, flooding the night with a cool, refulgent splendor that had texture and taste like licking a wounded creature. The landscape she revealed was pulchritudinous, esoteric, breathtakingly enigmatic. Crystalline plants humming with internal light. Rocks that seemed to breathe slowly, a secret, throbbing chamber of a world kept hidden from the day. And her gaze... her gaze was personal. It did not illuminate. It interrogated. It bathed me. It peeled me. It studied the very blueprint of my soul.

I looked down and gasped.

I was naked.

I stood there, blushing in the celestial spotlight, my skin singing under the lunar caress. The moon observed me, and her luminous face seemed to shift, to focus. The gentle smile of the moon curled, becoming obscene. Her gaze was no longer maternal. It was full of a hungry, sidereal lust. Instinctively, my hands flew to cover my breasts.

And then I froze.

A shock, sweeter and more profound than any touch, jolted my heart. They were mine again. My breasts. Not the phantom aches. Or the flattened plains. Or the hidden ruins. But the lovely, soft and velvety curves I had known before the iron. Before the fire. Before the flattening. Now restored. Risen. My heart swelled. A star going supernova in my chest, near to bursting with a wild, weeping, exuberant joy.

The moon's smile softened, melting from lust into something akin to pity or pride. She scanned my trembling, resurrected form, and I saw her celestial eyes. Craters and seas arranged into a familiar pattern. She blinked, a quick, affectionate wink. I could have sworn I heard the rhythmic, slow thudding of her great heart. I could see the vast curve of her rise and fall with deep, star-filled breaths in the sky. I managed a timid, womanly smile.

Moonlight adorned the distant rocky mountains, and the snow upon them shimmered like scattered stars. A small lake lay before my eyes, its grandeur far beyond my imagination. A long, sword-like beam of reflected light descended from the mountains and struck the lake, piercing my vision. It gleamed beneath the moonshine, and a few fish surfaced, holding their bodies still in the glow, as if posing for the night itself. They looked astonishingly fresh.

The moon beamed at me and said, "How are you?"

"Oh my god... Can you speak?"

"Yeah," the moon breathed, her exhalation a wave of peppermint cool light. "How are you feeling?"

"Cool," I whispered.

She grinned, a fissure of delight splitting her face.

"Why are you walking naked on a full moon?"

I had no answer. Maybe I was utterly clueless. Or maybe I was a grown up adult searching for her lost childhood.

"I was going to the mill... but when I came out, I was like this. I don't understand."

"Your body is gorgeous," she murmured, and the light pulsed warmly. "Your breasts are lovely."

I flushed, my arms tightening in a remembered reflex of shame.

“Don’t cover them,” she commanded, her tone gentle but immutable. “Please. Look at me. I am the pirate of your heart. Your every systole and diastole are treasures I claim as my own.”

I lifted my eyes, surrendering. She laughed then, a sound of crystalline bells shattering in slow motion, while a billion stars winked overhead in a conspiracy of brilliance. I was absolutely, gloriously disarmed.

“You are on the right track,” she said, and spilled her light over my cheeks like a liquid kiss.

“I don’t know where I am,” I confessed.

“Ha!” Her laughter, a lunar wind, a breeze that smelled of happiness and ancient longing. “You have escaped danger. That mill is no mill. It is a department for ghosts and vampires. Bureaucrats of the damned. They would have sucked your blood and pulverized your bones for paperwork.”

A chill, deeper than the tunnel’s damp, ran through me. “Oh my gosh.”

My love, the moon, saw me not as a product, but as a person.

“Do not fear. The orbit of your fate has changed. Now, I wish to transform you with my light.”

“Transform? Why?”

“Do you not wish to land upon my crust?” A cool, mentholated breath showered down on me, scouring away the last of my fear. “To walk on my seas of dust?”

“Obviously.”

“Then dive into that lake, and return to my radiance.”

Without hesitation, I ran. The grass was cool silk under my bare feet. I plunged into the small, dark lake. The water was a shock of icy fire. I swam through the surreal night, surfaced gasping into the silver air, and waded back to the shore, water streaming from my restored skin. I stood once more in the

moon's full beam. She seemed to be sleeping now, her light a steady, thrumming pulse. And for a fleeting, heart-stopping second, I saw or dreamed I saw, the face of Albert, my earthly anchor, superimposed upon her glowing sphere, his kind eyes peering directly into my soul.

Then, her vigorous light began its work.

It started as a tingling warmth in my solar plexus, a seed of change taking root. Slowly, so imperceptibly at first, it might have been imagination, a profound metamorphosis unfolded. My arms stretched, lengthened, lightened. A thousand pinpricks erupted along them as feathers, each one a perfect, vaned string of obsidian and silver, shushed into existence. My lips and jaws fused, hardened, elongated into a sharp, elegant beak like a polished onyx. My vision shattered and reformed, becoming monocular, sharp, and vast. The world flattening into a breathtaking configuration of heat and movement. The beloved nubile curves on my chest, so recently returned, melted away. Not with loss, but with purpose, smoothing into a sleek, aerodynamic torso. My legs drew in, grew thin and scaly, powerful pistons designed for landing on branches or the plains of another world.

Finally, with a silent, internal click that resonated through every newly formed bone, the change was complete. I was a magnificent bird. A creature of myth and night. Massive-winged. Taut with potential. Thudding with a wholly other life.

The Air of Freedom, a matter I had never truly breathed before, rushed over my new feathers with a roaring delight. I opened my beak and trilled a song of pure, untrammelled joy. A sound that was part nightingale, part falling star. I stretched my wings. My own wings! Their shadow blotting out acres of the moonlit ground. With one mighty, cracking beat that tore the air, I lifted into the sky.

I soared. The moon's light dazzled on my plumage, turning me into a shooting star in reverse, a dark comet hurtling toward the source. The fabulous world unfurled beneath me like a discarded map. Miniature houses like child's blocks. Buildings. Ribbons of roads that glistened like snail trails. Forests that were mere patches of dark mossy shadow. The great, gleaming, cyclopean eye of the ocean winking up at me. I soared higher, the earth shrinking, curling at the edges, becoming a blue-and-green marble lost in the cosmic dark.

"Oh, Moon!" I cried into the thin, singing air, my voice the wind through feathers. "I am coming closer! I love your magnificent desolation!"

She slept on, a colossal, luminous pearl in the velvet void. I will reach her, I thought, my avian mind vast and calm. I will wake her. We will speak not with words, but with the language of gravity and the poetry of young nebula.

We will chat about the history of planets and stars.

Up I drove, into altitudes where no bird, no dream, had ever soared. The sky itself turned a black so profound that it was a substance, a weight. The stars here did not twinkle. They burned with cold, steady, unforgiving fire. The mathematical points in an endless equation. After an eternity of ecstatic, straining flight, the very fabric of my being stretched thin between earth and heaven, my primary feather brushed her surface.

A whisper of crisp, colossal and magnanimous love. A sensation of infinite dryness, of ancient cold and tranquility. That is free, wild and looming at the apex of all things.

At the moment of touch, I woke up.

## The Memory of Feathers

**T**he dream died, but the memory lived forever.

I was in my bed. The digital clock displayed its red numbers into the dark: 3:17 AM. The dream, the most vast, vivid, and true dream of my life, clung to me like moondust, like the memory of feathers. I rose, a creature of flesh and weight again, and drank cool water from the pail, each swallow a grounding sacrament. I caught my reflection in the dark window: a girl's face gazed back, but her eyes held a trace of stellar distance, the image of a horizon never meant for human sight.

I returned to bed, the dream replaying in perfect, crystalline clarity behind my eyelids. I understood its message now, not as a metaphor, but as a direct transmission. A truth whispered not in words, but in the language of transformation, of flight, of a body made whole and then made glorious under a gaze that was both alien and intimately loving.

My heart, nestled within its cage of scarred bone and healed flesh, began to smile. And I felt that smile. A gentle, expanding wave of light, detach from me. It rippled out from my quiet room. Through the silent night, past the sleeping

moon still hanging in the real sky. It traveled on and on. Outracing light.  
Outlasting time. To the farthest galaxies, and beyond the edge of the universe.

A signal.

That I had been remade.

That I was forever unbound.

## II

### The Cartography of Scars

## A Body of Low Albedo

The dream of the moon did not fade. It condensed inside me. Its dust settled into the hollows of my bones, its cold light pooled in the spaces where my joy had been scorched away. I awoke not as a girl remade, but as a girl haunted by a more beautiful image of herself. In the mirror, the flat, scarred plane of my chest was a brutal truth. But in the back of my eyes, if I stared long enough, I could still see the phantom curves, feel the invisible-feathers of a wingspan that had blotted out the world.

It became a tenant in the hollows the iron had made, its beating wings a counter-rhythm to my silent heart. I had touched the moon in a world of dream, but I woke in a world of loss and grief. Albert's Snickers bar wrappers were now fossils in my pocket, and my sister's grave was a fresh, raw seam in the earth. I was a map of two territories: one of scar-tissue and recurrent pain, the other of lunar shines and impossible feathers. Learning to live in both was my new quest.

Albert noticed. Of course he did. He noticed the way I'd pause on our walk home, head tilted as if listening to a note just beyond the crickets' song.

"You're elsewhere," he said one afternoon, the sky a purplish-red. He wasn't accusing. he was just stating a fact, as bright as the full moon.

"I'm here," I said, but my voice sounded dull, fading against the thin air.

"You are," he agreed softly. "And you're also there. Wherever *there* is. Is it far?"

I looked at him, at his kind eyes magnified by lenses that saw so much. "It's as far as the moon. And as close as my own shadow."

He nodded, as if this made perfect sense. "Tell me about the air there."

And so, I began to tell him. Not the dream itself, its intimacy felt too vast, too naked, but its textures. The way the moon's light had tasted, like licking a wounded creature. The silence wasn't an absence of sound, but a feeling. The feeling of my own body becoming a bird, soaring higher and higher.

He listened as he always did. Completely. A blotting paper of imbibition. When I finished, he didn't speak for a long moment.

Then he said, "The moon's albedo is only about 12%. It's a terrible mirror. It absorbs most of the light that hits it. It only gives back a fraction."

He adjusted his glasses. "Maybe that's why it understands you."

The metaphor was so precise it stole my breath. I, too, felt like I absorbed all the violence, all the fear, and gave back only a sliver of what I received.

I was a body of low albedo.

School became an exercise in spectral navigation. I moved through the halls like a shadow who hadn't yet realized she was dead. The chatter of girls about new leggings, tight around curves I would never have. It was a song from a distant star. I would never hear. I wore my uniform loose, a shelter hiding the ruins. But Albert, my beloved, my quiet star, began to shine through the darkness of my sky.

He didn't ask about the dream. He seemed to sense it, the way a seismograph feels a distant earthquakes. Instead, he brought me maps. Not of our country, but of the lunar surface: the Sea of Tranquility, the crater Tycho, the Alpine Valley. He borrowed astronomy books from a missionary library, their pages smelling of excitement and hope.

"Selenography," he said one afternoon under the cedar tree, pointing to a photo of the moon's pocked face. "The study of its physical features. You said you wanted to be a selenologist. So, let's start with geography."

My voice was a rusty hinge. "Why? It's just a dream."

"Is it?" he asked, his gaze holding mine, magnified and serious behind his spectacles.

"You think in shapes and solutions, Broomhilda. Your mind is a precise instrument. Grief has fogged the lens, but it hasn't broken the glass. Focus on it here." He tapped the photograph. "On something too far away to burn."

So, we studied. We memorized craters and maria. He quizzed me, and for fleeting minutes, the searing memory of the hot stone was replaced by the cold, ancient impact that formed the craters of moon. My mind, the traumatized field, began to cultivate one stubborn crop. The knowledge of a world untouched by hands, unmarred by tradition.

"Albert Jackson," I whispered, a faint, real smile touching my lips for the first time in weeks. "You translate the universe."

He blushed, a crimson sunset spreading across his cheeks. "I only read the glossary."

## For Girls Who Look at the Moon

The idea came from a confluence of starlight and shame.

I was in the market, buying fertilizer for my father. A woman, Mrs. Nkam, was haggling loudly over plantains. Her daughter, a girl of about thirteen named Kemi, stood beside her. I saw the girl's eyes. They were bright, curious, landing on a poster for a science fair in Yaoundé. I saw the longing in them, a clean, sharp thing. Then I saw her unconsciously hunch her shoulders, a subtle folding-in of her chest. I knew that gesture. It was the pre-emptive flattening, the body trying to disappear before the stone could find it.

A cold clarity washed over me. The archive in my head, the maps from Albert, the moon's cold logic. It all crystallized.

That night, under the weak glow of a solar lamp, I began to write. Not a testimony, not a report. *A field guide.*

I called it: For Girls Who Look at the Moon: A Primer on Unseen Things.

Chapter 1: The Geometry of Your Body (It is yours. Its angles and curves are natural theorems.)

Chapter 2: The Chemistry of Fear (How tradition can be a reactive agent, bonding pain to love.)

Chapter 3: The Physics of Pressure (Why force applied to softness does not create safety, only damage.)

Chapter 4: Astronomy as Escape (How to build a telescope of the mind when your world grows small.)

Chapter 5: The Biology of Consequences (With simple diagrams. Cells. Tissue. The seeds of cancer.)

Chapter 6: The Geography of Help (Safe people. Safe places. The coordinates of escape.)

I wrote it in my clearest language, blending science and metaphor. I used my own story as a case study, anonymized. I drew diagrams of the solar system next to diagrams of breast anatomy, implying a similar, sacred complexity.

I showed the first pages to Albert. He read them in the lunchyard silence, his brow furrowed. When he finished, he was quiet for a long time.

"It's so cool....so wonderful, Broomhilda," he said finally. "A manifesto and a medical text. A star chart and a survival map."

He looked at me, his eyes shining.

"How will you publish it?"

"I'm not publishing it," I said. "I'm seeding it."

With Albert as my accomplice, we used his smartphone. We took photos of each page. We created a simple, anonymous blog. We didn't shout into the void. We performed targeted, quiet acts of dissemination.

Albert used his growing tech skills to find online forums for Cameroonian teens, for girls' education groups. He'd leave a cryptic comment: *For those who feel flat, look here.* With a link.

I approached girls like Kemi in the market, at the river. I didn't speak of ironing. I spoke of stars.

"Do you ever look up?" I'd ask. If they said yes, I'd say, "I have a thing about the moon. A little booklet. It's silly, but you might like it."

I'd hand them a carefully folded, handwritten copy. The first page showed the phases of the moon. The second defined selenology. By the third page, they were hooked on a language that respected their intellect before it ever addressed their pain.

It was a slow, profound process. A birth of young stars against the dark, distant canvas of the sky.

My mother found a copy.

I came home to find her sitting at the kitchen table, the pages of the Primer spread before her. Her face was unreadable. My heart coiled in my chest.

She did not look up.

"You write well," she said, her voice flat. "Your sentences are... very clear."

I said nothing.

She traced a line with her finger.

"Trauma to breast tissue does not prevent attention; it invites disease. It is the opposite of protection; it is the cultivation of a hidden harvest."

She looked up then. Her eyes were not angry. They were devastated.

"Is this true?"

"You know it's true," I said, my voice barely a whisper. "You buried the proof."

A sob broke from her, harsh and dry.

She put her head in her hands. "We called it *the pressing*. It sounded... gentle. Like preparing a garment."

"You were not preparing a garment, Mama. You were erasing a landscape."

She lifted her tear-streaked face. "Can a map be redrawn?"

The question hung between us. It wasn't an apology. It was something more meaningful: a request for data. For a new set of coordinates.

"I'm trying to draw one," I said.

## Twin Moons and Falling Stars

The night was a velvet press against my window. A single solar lamp cast a feverish halo on my desk, a tiny star in the terrestrial dark. Before me lay the blank page. A terrifying expanse of possible truth.

I had written the clinical parts first: the biology, the physics of pressure. They were walls built with the cool, clean bricks of fact. But now, I had to build the bridge between the body and the soul. The chapter on metaphor.

My pen hovered. How to explain that the hot stone was not just a stone, but a falling star meant to extinguish a private galaxy? That the flattened chest was not just tissue damage, but a silenced language of curves, a book burnt before it was published?

I closed my eyes and saw the spider's web from that beautiful walk to school. Each strand, a gleaming filament of purpose.

Start with the thread, I thought. Just one true thread.

I lowered the pen. The ink flowed, a blue river of promise. Letters shined with life and emotions.

“Your body is not a problem to be solved,” I wrote, the letters bold and urgent. “It is a universe to be explored. They try to flatten galaxies within you, to make you a blank, dark sky. But listen: even the darkest nebula is a nursery for stars. Your pain is not a void. It is a dense, creative space. From its pressure, new forms of courage are being born.”

I wrote of breasts not as beacons for predators, but as twin moons. Balancing a personal orbit, governing an inner sea of feeling. I wrote of the iron not as a tool, but as a failed element of safety.

Sentence by sentence, I performed my own counter-chemistry. I took the base metal of my trauma and began, haltingly, to transmute it into ink, into meaning. The lamp hummed. The night wore on. I was no longer just a girl in a room. I was a scribe in a sacred, desperate ceremony, writing a spell of un-flattening. One word at a time.

## The Nod

The culmination came with the science fair. Albert had entered a project on tidal forces, linking the cosmic (the Comet Galaxy being ripped apart) to the earthly (our local river tides). He'd asked me to help with the visual model.

The fair was held in the community hall. To our shock, my mother came. She stood at the back, a still, dark figure against the bright posters.

Albert was magnificent. He explained gravitational betrayal with a calm, luminous authority. The judges, including a visiting doctor from Douala, were impressed.

Afterward, the doctor, a woman with a sharp, intelligent face named Dr. Amina, approached our table. She praised Albert's work, then her eyes fell on our display. We'd included, almost as an afterthought, a small, beautiful diagram from my Primer: a side-by-side illustration of a healthy breast lobule and one scarred by repeated trauma. It was labeled simply: Comparative Biology: Nurture vs. Force.

Dr. Amina's professional smile faded. She studied it intently. "This is... exceptionally well-rendered. Anatomically precise. Where did you get this?"

Albert glanced at me. I took a breath. "I drew it."

She looked from the diagram to my face, her gaze missing nothing.

"Why?"

"Because someone needs to map the damage," I said, my voice steady. "Before more girls become uncharted territory."

Dr. Amina was silent for a long moment. Then she reached into her bag and produced a card. "I run a women's health initiative. We collect data. We provide care."

She looked at the diagram again, then at me. "Your work has the clarity of both personal witness and scientific observation. That is a powerful alloy. Would you consider sharing more of it?"

As I took her card, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned. It was my mother. Her eyes were on Dr. Amina, then on me. She didn't speak. She simply gave the smallest, most decisive nod. It was the gesture of a scientist acknowledging a new research blueprint.

## The Plateau

The twist came completely out of the blue. A letter arrived for Albert, forwarded from his old school in Nigeria. It was an acceptance. A full scholarship to a prestigious science academy in Lagos. It was his dream. A launchpad to universities abroad, to study astrophysics for real.

He showed me the letter, his face a storm of joy and anguish.

"I can't go," he said immediately.

"Why?" I asked, though I knew.

The thought of his absence was a new kind of hollowing.

"Because of you," he said, simply, devastatingly.

His words were a mirror, and in them I saw not a victim to be protected, but an anchor holding back a brilliant, kind soul. I thought of the moon in my dream, urging me to fly. I thought of the lacerating love that had tried to flatten me to keep me safe.

"You have to go," I said, my voice stronger than it had been in months.

"You are my telescope, Albert. You showed me there's a universe beyond this village. Now go and see it for both of us. Report back."

We stood at our fork in the path, the place where we always parted. This time, the parting was for the oceans. He gave me his cracked smartphone.

“Keep the archive,” he said. “Tell the story. Not just yours. Everyone’s.”

He kissed me then, not on the lips, but gently on the forehead, a blessing and a passing of the torch.

*“You are the strongest person I know, Broomhilda. You are not flat. You are a plateau. A high, vast place where the view is clear.”*

## The Secret Archive

The silence at home was heavy and adamant. My father was a shadow against the fields. My mother moved through her chores with a rigid, mechanical efficiency, her eyes avoiding my body, my face, the space where Mary used to be. The Chamber of Hell was locked, but its smell of dust, fear, and scorched memory, leaking into the house.

I began to listen not to sounds, but to silences. I heard the hesitation in my mother's step outside my door at night. I saw the way her hands trembled slightly when she lit the kitchen fire. A flinch at the flame she had wielded with such certainty. One evening, I found her staring at Mary's photograph, her thumb tracing the glass over my sister's smiling, vibrant face. A single, soundless tear traced down her cheeks.

The sight of her grief did not soothe my heart; it only deepened my rage.

I started a secret archive. In a hollow behind a loose brick in my room, I began to write. Not a diary of feelings, but a document. I described the procedure with the cold detail of a biology report: the temperature of the stones

(estimated), the duration of pressure, the stages of tissue necrosis, the subsequent abscesses, the fevers. I noted my sister's symptoms before her diagnosis. I wrote down the names I overheard in whispered market conversations who assisted in breast ironing. I was no longer just a victim; I was becoming a witness collecting evidence.

## A Purposeful Quiet

With Albert gone, a new silence descended, but this one was different. It was a purposeful quiet, filled with the hum of the smartphone, the click of my keyboard, the rustle of my hidden notes. I began to compile my archive with the precision I once used for geometry problems. I connected with a local women's rights lawyer I found through the forum, a formidable woman in Yaoundé who communicated in terse, powerful emails.

My mother sensed the change. She saw me hunched over the phone, my face lit by its glow in the dark. "What is that?" she demanded one night.

"An online library," I said, meeting her eyes for the first time since the ironing. The word felt dangerous and wonderful.

She stared at me, and I saw not just the artisan of ruin, but a woman terrified of the world she had tried to armor me against. A world I was now actively connecting to, despite her.

My sister's absence was a room in our house that grew larger every day. Mother moved through it like a sleepwalker, her hands performing the rituals

of cooking and cleaning while her spirit seemed tethered to Mary's empty bed. The grief had sanded the hard edges off her certainty. Sometimes, I'd catch her watching me with a strange, lost expression, as if I were a landmark in a country whose map she had burned.

One evening, as I washed dishes, she spoke to my back. Her voice was husked-out, raw.

"Does it still hurt?"

The question hung in the steam between us. She meant my chest.

I kept scrubbing a pot. "The physical pain is like a fluctuating weather system. It comes and goes. The rain is... internal."

I didn't know how else to describe the abscesses, the fevers.

A long silence. Then, "I thought I was drawing a border. To keep the monsters out."

"You were the monster, Mama." The words were calm, factual. I had no energy for venom.

She inhaled sharply, turned and left, her shoulders bowed under a weight no mother should ever carry.

\* \* \*

The final break happened on the anniversary of Mary's death. We stood at her grave. My mother placed a wreath of wilted flowers. I placed a single, printed sheet from a UN report on breast ironing, weighted with a stone.

"What is that?" she hissed.

"The truth," I said. "The truth about what you did to her. It wasn't protection, Mama. It was the first cell of the cancer that killed her. You didn't

save her future. You murdered it.”

Her face crumpled, not in anger, but in a wave of such profound, recognized agony that she sank to her knees in the dirt. The wall of her certainty finally cracked, and out poured a wail that held all the silenced screams of her own childhood, of her mother’s hands, of a lineage of fear passed down like a cursed heirloom.

I did not comfort her. I let her grieve the monstrous thing she had believed was love. I stood as a pillar for a new truth.

## The Digital Whisper

Before going to Lagos, it was Albert, in his roundabout way, who gave me the tool. He finally had gotten a smartphone, a cracked, second-hand thing he'd hidden from his grandmother. "For research," he'd said solemnly, but his eyes gleamed.

He showed me how to use the browser. One rain-soaked afternoon in the back of the nearly empty school library, my fingers trembling, I typed the words I had carried like a curse: *Breast ironing Cameroon*.

The screen filled. Not with myths, but with reports from UNICEF. Articles from the BBC. Testimonies from NGOs. Medical journals detailing the long-term damage: cysts, infections, breastfeeding impossibility, heightened cancer risk. My breath caught. *Heightened cancer risk*. The words swam before my eyes. Here it was, in clinical typeface, the link between the ritual and the ruin that took Mary. It wasn't just tradition; it was a pathology.

I wasn't alone. The "silent sisterhood" had a digital whisper. I found a closed forum, a secret group for survivors. With Albert as my lookout, I created a fake account. I didn't post my story at first. I read. I read stories from

girls in Douala, in Bamenda, in villages with names like my own. Stories of belts, of hot spoons, of pounded pestles. Stories of shame, of broken engagements when the truth was discovered, of husbands furious at the “spoiled” goods. And stories, like tiny, fierce stars, of resistance. A girl who ran away to a city shelter. A woman, now a nurse, campaigning in her community.

One night, I typed my first sentence: *My name is Broomhilda. My mother used a stone and an iron. My sister died of cancer afterward.*

The response was not an explosion, but an outstretched hand. Dozens of private messages flooded in. *We see you. We are here. You are not ruined.*

## Contours of Survival

**I**t has been six months. Albert writes emails describing supernovae and space-time curvature. I write back describing my progress.

With the lawyer's help, my archive: anonymized, but detailed, contributed to a national lawsuit against practitioners. I have not named my mother. Some wars are not fought in courts, but in the quiet cartography of a changing heart. She looks at me now not as a possession to be flattened, but as a strange, unfamiliar satellite, orbiting a world she cannot reach.

I stand on the old bridge, the same one I crossed in terror and confusion. The morning mist is rising. In my hand, I hold not a Snickers wrapper, but an acceptance letter. Not for a school abroad, but for a nurse-training program in Yaoundé, with a focus on public health. It is a different kind of flight.

I look up at the fading moon, a pale sphere in the brightening blue. I no longer need to dream of touching it. My mission is here, in the gravity-well of my own world. My body is still a map of scars, but I have learned to read them not as inscriptions of shame, but as contours of survival, landmarks on a journey out of darkness.

## The Gravitational Constant

I recalled the memories of that night when Albert and I walked to our fork in the path under a sky adorned with incredible number of stars. The air was sweet with ripening mangoes. The scent of happiness.

“You’re leaving,” I said. It wasn’t a question. The science fair had been his launchpad. His scholarship to Lagos was waiting.

“The academy starts next month,” he said, his voice thick.

“You have to go. You’re a star that needs a bigger sky.”

He smiled, a sad, beautiful thing. “You sound like my Primer.”

“I learned from the best translator.” I reached into my pocket and pulled out a small, wrapped object. “For your journey.”

He unwrapped it. It was a smooth, dark river stone. But I had painted it, with minute, delicate brushes Albert himself had lent me. One side was a perfect, tiny map of the full moon, craters and all. The other side was a mathematical equation: the formula for the gravitational constant.

He stared at it, his breath catching. “It’s... a theorem,” he whispered. “A theorem of us. The moon’s pull. The gravity between two bodies.”

“A constant,” I said.

Tears welled behind his glasses. He didn’t wipe them away. He took my hand. The first time our skin had ever fully met. His hand was warm, steady, slightly trembling.

“Just don’t lose yourself, Broomhild, because I fear losing you.” He said, brushing his tears. “I will write to you. Every week. I will send you coordinates of new galaxies.”

“And I will send you maps,” I promised. “Maps of here. Maps of the damage and the healing.”

He leaned forward and pressed his forehead against mine, a stellar conjunction under the ancient stars. We stood there, two strange, scarred, brilliant creatures held in the silent equation of our friendship, a gravity that no distance could negate.

“From promisingly wonderful sunrise to a desperately gloomy sunset, I’ll be waiting for you. Always.” He said at last, with a fading smile.

\* \* \*

“One day, a new dawn will come, and everything will fall into its rightful place. Then I will wrap you in my arms. You will dissolve into me. We will exist as one.”

He told me this on his last day, before his flight to Lagos.

“That day feels like a shining star in the sky,” I said. “Beautiful, but impossible to reach.”

“Don’t say that,” he whispered, and kissed my cheek.

In that moment, the sad black sky of my heart ignited. And was lit by billions of exploding rays, as if they poured straight from the body of Apollo himself.

“That day will come,” he continued. “And you and I will sit together, discussing the stories of the stars.”

## A New Star is Born

I am in my classroom, on the last bench, sitting beside Albert. We, too, are stranded there in silence. No classmates. No teachers. And the board remains completely empty.

He gazes out the window at the distant clouds, as if they are fragments of his own soul scattered across the sky. I look at him as though he is my very heart. My sweetheart. Beating with a silent rhythm only I can hear.

"I'm going outside," he says. "You stay here."

"Where are you going, Albert?" I ask, squaring my shoulders.

He doesn't answer. I excuse him. He bolts out the door."

Now I remain alone, watching the empty board, imagining myself writing a tale of the moon upon it. Drawing its craters. Scribbling the formula for the Schwarzschild radius. The radius of the event horizon surrounding a non-rotating black hole. The point of no return. I think I, too, have crossed a point of no return, ascending into a strange dimension of time.

I notice Albert's familiar bag, filled with books, notes, and a sandwich for lunch. A curious impulse takes hold of me, and I unzip it. I don't know why I

am doing this. Maybe I am searching for a treasure only I could ever discover.

Inside his bag, I uncover a small diary. Perhaps his personal one. I am seized by an irresistible urge to flip through its pages, to glimpse what he has written. The boy who never told me enough about himself. Who only listened to my endless rants. Who listened not just to my words but also to my silences.

The first page begins with a simple title: *Story About My Life*. Beneath it, nothing. The next pages are empty too. No letters. No confessions. No traces of thought. I am bewildered. What was he thinking when he wrote that first line? And why did no words follow?

The diary feels like an infant promised the life of a world, yet quietly dying in the womb.

I am taken aback when I find letters written in black ink in the middle of the diary. It is his handwriting, no doubt about it. The same neat, careful script. It does not begin with an autobiography, but with the anguished wail of a soul whose very existence seems sabotaged for the devil's own pleasure. The tone is sad and pensive. This is not just a writing. These are the feelings buried inside his heart. Feelings now sprouting like a miraculous plant of emotion:

**Her tears are frozen. The light on her face has been extinguished. The colors in her eyes have faded into ash. Her once-euphonic voice lies dampen and broken. Her hands and feet tremble. Her lips are parched. Her heart is cracked. Her spirit is attenuated. Her body defiled. Her skin marred. Her thick, dark, beautiful hair tangled and ruined. Her clothes soaked in blood. Her wounds weep red agony. Her life has been drained. Her dreams abducted.**

**Horror fills perception. Love becomes a distant, blazing star. Loneliness tightens its grip on the mind. Laughter and joy lie buried behind bloodshot eyes. Everything feels like a nightmare. Reality stings**

with venom. Her feeble heart aches without rest. Her lungs struggle to breathe. Her stomach caves inward. Her private part, the girlhood, is shattered beyond repair. Her youth has withered. She is debased. Her pride stained.

Once, she was a young star, blazing with beauty and vitality. Now she is debris. Marooned on an island of helplessness.

Silence is her color. Fear is her name. Darkness is her only companion. Her mornings open with dry, empty eyes. Her nights close in pools of evaporating tears. Her heart ticks in lamentation. Her mind is haunted by ruthless touches, by violent memories.

She screams. She sobs. She weeps. With every falling tear, her life leaks away.

Nothing can return what was stolen. Nothing can fully mend a heart shattered like glass. Nothing can restore that same fragrant smile. A part of her soul has been murdered. A part of her life is gone forever.

For her, time is another terror. For her, living is survival. She walks through her world in darkness. She listens to heart-rending music inside silence. She befriends premonitions. She embraces desolation. She floats homeless in an endless ocean of grief. She does not know what tomorrow holds. She does not know why she still breathes.

She was once gentle. Innocent. Like a canopy of forest shade. Modest at her core. Kind in her veins. She never provoked. Never wounded with words. Never wore arrogance.

Always soft. Always tender. Always pure. Always loved.

She believed she had nothing to fear. She believed the world was good. She had not seen its monsters. Her mind was filled with light, so she never imagined darkness lived beside it.

**She never imagined someone would one day crush her into nothing.  
She was such a gullible little girl!**

**Now wherever she goes, they ask: How were you raped? Where were  
you touched? Who did it? How long did it last?**

**No one asks: What do you need now?**

**No one asks: How can we help you heal?**

**No one asks: How do we give you justice?**

**To her, justice has become just ice. Melting under the heat of power  
and politics.**

**She stands at the window of the present and gazes toward the future. It  
is dark. It is blurred. She rubs her eyes. Nothing clears.**

**A hand touches her shoulder. She jolts. Turns. Sees her brother. Love  
lives in his eyes. But trauma distorts everything. Even love looks like  
danger. He holds her trembling hands. A cold shiver races down her  
spine.**

**“Nobody will hurt you,” he says softly. “Calm down. Everything will  
be alright.”**

**He leaves. She collapses back into herself. Drowning in warm,  
strange, endless tears.**

**She had dreams. She still has dreams. But the scar inside her screams  
too loudly.**

**She may marry one day, but may never love.**

**She may laugh in daylight, but will cry alone at night. Silent sobs  
soaking the pillow.**

**Some things cannot be undone. Some wounds never disappear. Some  
things we have to just accept and move on. Every dark, evil incident has**

**a brighter side. Every misfortune has a silver lining. Every problem has an opportunity.**

**Rape is undeniably a hideous and horrendous act of humanity. It is not desire. It is not sex. It is violence. It is cruelty.**

**Sex without consent is rape.**

**Sometimes we are destroyed so deeply that no one stands beside us. But one thing remains. Hope. Do not lose it. Be homeless, not hopeless. Your pain can become your power. Your survival can become your revolution. You are not alone. You are still needed. You still matter.**

**There is more life waiting for you.**

**You gotta live. There is much more meaning in living. A bigger purpose in helping. Don't give a shit to those people who wanna let you down. They are the one who torture victims, but foster criminals.**

**Night after night she wakes screaming. Shadows crawl across her walls. She curls into herself. She screams the hell out of her. Her brother rushes in. Holds her shaking hands.**

**"It shouldn't be you who suffers," he cries. "It should be that filthy bastard."**

**She stares, hollow, her gaze frozen.**

**"Please don't leave me," he begs. "You're all I have."**

**He strokes her hair. Kisses her forehead.**

**"Sleep now. I'm here."**

**She closes her eyes.**

**And for the first time in a long time, a small smile appears. Not the smile of forgetting. Not the smile of erasing. But the smile of surviving. The**

**smile of beginning. The smile of a brand-new life.**

### **A New Star is Born.**

Outside the classroom window, the world has fallen into an eerie silence. The birds have stopped calling. The noise of vehicles is muffled. Only the sound of my own heartbeat remains.

In his words, I find a girl who has lost everything, yet still clings to a final thread of hope. I am like her. Similar in almost every way. And her brother... her brother might be Albert himself. He has only ever spoken to me about his grandmother, never a word about parents or siblings. Maybe she is his sister. Maybe not. I will only know when he comes back.

I wait for him, and at the same time my eyes remain fixed on his writing. A shadowy image of a girl forms in my mind. She is alone in the darkness, filled with silent sobs. A future erased. Loveliness fractured. A heart wilted.

Then her brother switches on the light in her room. He sits beside her. Gently comforts her. In him, she sees the hope she has lost within herself. And the fire of hope inside him slowly ignites hope in her. And in this quiet miracle, a new star is born.

Albert's diary suddenly feels weightless in my palm. Gradually, the letters begin to fade, until the page turns blank. From the vast emptiness of the paper, luminous rays burst forth, blinding my eyes. Blinding the entire room. And in that instant, I wake up. From my sleep. From my dream. From something that felt more like reality than a dream.

## The Gravitational Lens of Grief

A year after Albert left, I tread the fork in the path again, under a thunderous sky. I had received a printed email from Albert and went to the place to read it.

The sky was a bruised breast of purple and red, threatening to split. The air tasted of nostalgia, heavy with the scent of damp earth. At the fork where our ways had diverged, I sat on the familiar, moss-capped stone and unfolded the printed email.

“Broomhilda,” it began, his voice clear in the text. “Today we studied gravitational lenses. How massive objects warp the fabric of space-time, bending light from distant stars. They distort the image, but they also magnify it, revealing galaxies otherwise too faint to see.”

I could hear him saying it, his tone thoughtful, his eyes bright behind the lenses of his mind.

“I think grief is a gravitational lens. It warps everything. It distorts the past and bends the future into strange shapes. But, Broomhilda, it also magnifies. It has magnified your courage until it is a brilliant, undeniable quasar in my sky.

It has magnified your words until they are a guidebook for a generation. The distortion is real, and the pain is the mass of it. But never forget the magnification. You are not diminished. You are revealed.”

A warm crack of thunder rolled across the hills. The first fat, cold drops began to fall, kissing the paper, blurring the ink of the word “magnification.”

I did not shelter the page. Let the rain have it. Let the sky read it.

He had taken the equation of us. The distance. The silence. The memory. All he solved for constant. Not a boy, not a savior, but a fixed point in the chaotic calculus of my life. A distant, steady pulse, like the pulsar, timing its beat across the light-years.

I stood as the rain thickened, the paper dissolving into pulp in my hands, the words returning to the earth. It didn’t matter. They were already inscribed inside me, a new line in my personal cartography. He was mapping the cosmos. I was mapping the scars. And across the impossible distance, our maps were whispering to each other. Telling the same essential story: that even in a universe of violence and distortion, there exists the relentless, beautiful pull of a truth seeking its own shape.

The rain soaked my blouse, my skirt and my hair. It plastered the fabric to the ruined landscape of my chest. For the first time, I did not hunch. I stood straight in the downpour, feeling not the shame of the scars, but the cool, clean touch of the sky. It was a baptism in the present. A washing away of the ash.

I was not fixed. I was not whole. But I was, unmistakably, rising.

The darkest night arrived like a love that clung to the soul. The sky bloomed with an infinite number of stars, shimmering faintly in the cold air. Then I heard a soft voice rising from the depths of my own heart:

**O star,**

do you, too, carry a heart within?  
Do you know how to beat, how to ache?  
You smile and glimmer in the sky,  
you sing a song so sweet  
one could listen for eternity.

**O beautiful flowers of the heavens,**

when my heart shatters,  
does yours shatter too?  
When I weep,  
do you weep as well?

**O distant fairy of light,**

you dance,  
unfurling your refulgent wings.  
You arrived bearing love in color.  
You gilded the cavern of my heart with sparkling light.  
You kissed me,  
you gathered me into your soft arms,  
and I fell asleep upon your warm breast.

At dawn I opened my eyes,  
you were nowhere to be found.  
Yet your memories were smiling,  
and your heartbeats were softly humming.

## To RISE

I stand at my sister's grave. It is no longer a fresh wound, but a grief distilled into the earth. I place two things upon it: a fresh white orchid. A bound copy of *For Girls Who Look at the Moon*.

"I'm redrawing the map, Mary," I whisper. "The landmarks they gave us were illusions. The real world is inside. It's vast, forever expanding. Like the moon with its craters and seas, it is marked by scars. Yet scars are just the recorded history. The lived experience is a different mountain. Cold, rugged and bitter."

To them, it's dust.

To me, it's a universe.

\* \* \*

A bright, fresh morning opens its eyes to the sparrows' song and opens its soul to the distant rhythm of soft hymns, each note carrying the breath of an angel.

The wind stirs the pages. Sunlight bursts suddenly through rifted clouds. Flowers confess their love in sweet fragrance. Ahead, a mossy cobblestone path lies wide and welcoming, as if holding the feet of time itself. Fallen leaves rest dried upon the ground like discarded feelings. They are beautiful in their own quiet way. Every ending whispers the promise of a new beginning. Rivers sing a timeless melody, while a thousand sunbeams dance upon their surface. A perfect display of a blinding, captivating joy.

Dr. Amina is coming next week. We are going to translate the Primer into three local languages. We will distribute it through clinics, hospitals, through churches and communities under the guise of “girls’ science education.”

At home, my mother is waiting. She has prepared *foléré* tea. We sit in a silence that is no longer empty, but charged with the unspoken work of restoring a world.

I pick up my pen. I open a new notebook. At the top of the page, I write:

Chapter 1: The Albedo of the Soul.

*How much light you absorb, and how much you choose to give back, is the first law of your own physics.*

I am Broomhilda Vane.

I was once reduced to a single, flat, horrible note.

But I am a landscape now. A fusion of heaven and hope.

I am learning to sing the entire spectrum of joy.

No longer bound to a tragic melody.

I am a hypothesis, constantly being tested.

Between the stones and the stars, I choose the sky.

My life is slowly turning into a beautiful, eternal river.

Perseverance as its current. Proof as its destination.

I am externally breaking, but internally building.

I am only beginning to RISE.

As day closed and night struck the earth with the speed of a peregrine, the moon rose. The Aphrodite of the sky. Tattooed with scars, she laughed a peal so perfect it seemed to carry my soul within her. Whoever dies may find their soul resting forever in the lunar bosom. A place where she breathes peace, and the only music is the tranquil chime of starlight.

I look into the mirror once before going to bed. I saw a different person. Lonely yet lively. She smiled not with an announcement but with a surprise. I saw her eyes. My own eyes. Now glowing with peace. The sound of nirvana.

## About the Author

**S**AUROVE KANDEL is a writer from Kathmandu, Nepal. His journey into writing began at the age of 14, during his middle school years. He is a BDS graduate from Kist Medical College and continues to pursue his passion for literature. Saurove derives inspiration from a variety of sources: Hiking in nature. Dreams. Music. Foods. Books. Cinema. Day to day events. And so on.

*Feathers in the Ash* is his debut novel.



FEATHERS  
IN THE  
ASH

SAUROVE  
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